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THE
SHADOW OF ASHLYDYAT.

BY MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYXNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "VERNER'S PRIDE," ETC.

"Over him rushed, like a wind that is keen and cold and relentless,
Thoughts of what might have been, and the weight and woe of his errand ;
All the dreams that had faded, and all the hopes that had vanished,
All his life henceforth a dreary and tenantless mansion,
Haunted by vain regrets, and pallid, sorrowful faces."

LONGFELLOW.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE SHADOW OF ASHLYDYAT.

CHAPTER I.

A FIERY TRIAL.

MARIA GODOLPHIN, her face buried on the sofa cushions, where she had sunk on the departure of the Reverend Mr. Hastings, was giving way to the full tide of unhappy thought induced by that gentleman's words, when she became aware that she was not alone. A sound, half a grunt, half a sob, coming from near the door, aroused her. There stood a lady, in a crushed bonnet and unwholesome stuff gown that had once been black, with a red face, and a perfume of strong waters around her.

Maria rose from the sofa, her heart sinking. How should she meet this woman? how find an excuse for the money which she had not to give? "Good-morning, Mrs. Bond."

Mrs. Bond took a few steps forward, and held on by the table. Not that she was past the power of holding herself; her face must be redder than it was, by some degrees, ere she lost that; but she had a knack of holding on to things.

"I have come for my ten-pound note, if you please, ma'am."

Few can imagine what this moment was to Maria Godolphin; for few are endowed with the sensitiveness of temperament, the refined consideration for the feelings of others, the acute sense of justice, which characterised her. Maria would willingly have given a hundred pounds to have had ten then. How she made the revelation, she scarcely knew—that she had not the money that morning to give.

Mrs. Bond's face turned rather defiant. "You told me to come down for it, ma'am."

"I thought I could have given it to you. I am very sorry. I must trouble you to come when Mr. George Godolphin shall have returned home."

"Is he going to return?" asked Mrs. Bond, in a quick, hard tone. "Folks is saying that he isn't."

Maria's heart beat painfully at the words. *Was* he going to return? She could only say aloud that she hoped he would very soon be home.

"But I want my money," resumed Mrs. Bond, standing her ground. "I must have it, ma'am, if you please."

"I have not got it," said Maria. "The very instant I have it it shall be returned to you."

"I'd make bold to ask, ma'am, what right you had to spend it? Warn't there enough money in the bank of other folks's as you might have took, without taking mine—which you had promised to keep faithful for me?" reiterated Mrs. Bond, warming with her subject. "I warn't a deposit in the bank, as them folks was, and I'd no right to have my money took. I want to pay my rent to-day, and to get in a bit o' food. The house is bare of everything. There's the parrot a screeching out for seed."

It is of no use to pursue the interview. Mrs. Bond

grew bolder and more abusive. But for having partaken rather largely of that cordial which was giving out its scent upon the atmosphere, she had never so spoken to her clergyman's daughter. Maria received it meekly, her heart aching: she felt very much as did Thomas Godolphin—that she had *earned* the reproaches. But endurance has its limits: she began to feel really ill; and she saw, besides, that Mrs. Bond appeared to have no intention of departing. Escaping out of the room in the midst of a fierce speech, she encountered Pierce, who was crossing the hall.

“Go into the dining-room, Pierce,” she whispered, “and try and get rid of Mrs. Bond. She is not quite herself this morning, and—and—she talks too much. But be kind and civil to her, Pierce: let there be no disturbance.”

Her pale face, as she spoke, was lifted to the butler almost pleadingly. He thought how wan and ill his mistress looked. “I'll manage it, ma'am,” he said, turning to the dining-room.

By what process Pierce did manage it was best known to himself. There was certainly no disturbance. A little talking, and Maria thought she heard the sound of something liquid being poured into a glass near the sideboard, as she stood out of view behind the turning at the back of the hall. Then Pierce and Mrs. Bond issued forth, the best friends imaginable, the latter smacking her lips and talking amiably.

Maria came out from her hiding-place, but only to encounter some one who had pushed in at the hall door as Mrs. Bond left it. A little man in a white neck-cloth. He advanced straight to Mrs. George Godolphin.

“Can I speak a word to you, ma'am, if you please?” he asked, taking off his hat.

She could only answer in the affirmative, and she led the way to the dining-room. She wondered who he was: his face seemed familiar to her. The first words he spoke told her, and she remembered him as the head assistant at the linendraper's where she chiefly dealt. He had been sent to press for the payment of the account. She could only tell him as she had told Mrs. Bond—that she was unable to pay it.

“Mr. Jones would be so very much obliged to you, ma'am,” he civilly urged. “It has been standing now some little time, and he hopes you will stretch a point to pay him. If you could only give me part of it, he would be glad.”

“I have not got it to give,” said Maria, telling the truth in her unhappiness. She could but be candid: she was unable to fence with them, to use subterfuge, as others might have done. She spoke the truth, and she spoke it meekly. When Mr. George Godolphin came home, she hoped she should pay them, she said. The messenger took the answer, losing none of his respectful manner, and departed.

But all were not so civil; and many found their way to her that day. Once a thought came across her to send them into the bank; but she remembered Thomas Godolphin's failing health, and the battle he had to fight on his own account. Besides, these claims were for personalities—debts owing by herself and George. In the afternoon, Pierce came in and said a lady wished to see her.

“Who is it?” asked Maria.

Pierce did not know. She was not a visitor of the house. She gave in her name as Mrs. Harding.

The applicant came in. Maria recognized her, when she threw back her veil, as the wife of Harding the

undertaker. Pierce closed the door, and they were left together.

“I have taken the liberty of calling, Mrs. George Godolphin, to ask if you will not pay our account,” began the applicant, in a low, confidential tone. “Do pray let us have it if you can, ma’am!”

Maria was surprised. There was nothing owing that she was aware of. There could be nothing. “What account are you speaking of?” she asked.

“The account for the interment of the child. Your little one who died last, ma’am.”

“But surely that is paid!”

“No, it is not,” replied Mrs. Harding. “The other accounts were paid, but that never has been. Mr. George Godolphin has promised it times and again: but he never paid it.”

Not paid! The burial of their child! Maria felt her face flush. Was it carelessness on George’s part, or had he been so long embarrassed for money that to part with it was a trouble to him? Maria could not help thinking that he might have spared some little remnant for just debts, while lavishing so much upon the bill-discounters. She could not help feeling another thing—that it was George’s place to be meeting and battling with these unhappy claims, rather than hers.

“This must be paid, of course, Mrs. Harding,” she said. “I had no idea but that it was paid. When Mr. George Godolphin comes home, I will ask him to see about it instantly.”

“Ma’am, can’t you pay me *now*?” urged Mrs. Harding. “If it waits till the bankruptcy’s declared, it will have to go into it; and they say—they do say that there’ll be nothing for anybody. We can’t afford to lose it,”

she added, speaking confidentially. "What with bad debts and long-standing out accounts, we are on the eve of a crisis ourselves; though I should not like it to be known. This will help to stave it off, if you will let us have it."

"I wish I could," returned Maria. "I wish I had it to give to you. It ought to have been paid long ago."

"A part of it was money paid out of our pocket," said Mrs. Harding, in a reproachful tone. "Mrs. George Godolphin, you don't know the boon it would be to us!"

"I would give it to you, indeed I would, if I had it," was all Maria could answer.

She could not say more if Mrs. Harding stopped until night. Mrs. Harding became at last convinced of that truth, and took her departure. Maria sat down with burning eyes; eyes into which the tears would not come.

What with one dropped hint and another, she had grown tolerably conversant with the facts patent to the world. One whisper startled her more than any other. It concerned the bonds of Lord Averil. What was it that was amiss with them? That there was something, and something bad, appeared only too evident. In her terrible state of suspense, of uncertainty, she determined to inquire of Thomas Godolphin.

Writing a few words on a slip of paper, she sent it into the bank parlour. It was a request that he would see her before he left. Thomas sent back a verbal message, "Very well."

It was growing late in the evening before he came to her. What a day he had had! And he had taken no nourishment, nothing to sustain him. Maria thought of that, and spoke.

"Let me get you something," she said. "Will you

take a bit of dinner here, instead of waiting to get to Ashlydyat?"

He shook his head in token of refusal. "It is not much dinner that I shall eat anywhere to-day, Maria. Did you wish to speak to me?"

"I want—to—ask——" she seemed to gasp for breath, and waited a moment for greater calmness. "Thomas," she began again, going close to him, and speaking almost in a whisper, "what is it that is being said about the bonds of Lord Averil?"

Thomas Godolphin did not immediately reply. He may have been deliberating whether it would be well to tell her; perhaps whether it *could* be kept from her. Maria seemed to answer the thought.

"I must inevitably know it," she said, striving not to tremble outwardly as well as inwardly. "Better that I hear it from you than from others."

He thought she was right—that the knowledge must inevitably come to her. "It may be better to tell you, Maria," he said. "George used the bonds for his own purposes."

A dread pause. Maria's throat was working. "Then—it must have been he who took them from the strong-room!"

"It was."

The shivering came on palpably now. "What will be the consequences?" she breathed.

"I do not know. I dread to think. Lord Averil may institute a prosecution."

Their eyes met. Maria controlled her emotion, with the desperate energy of despair. "A—criminal—prosecution?"

"It is in his power to do it. He has not been near me to-day, and that looks unfavourable."

“Does he know it yet—that it was George?”

“He must know it. In fact, I think it likely he may have received official notice of it from town. The report has got spread from thence—and that is how it has become known at Prior’s Ash.”

Maria moistened her dry lips, and swallowed down the lump in her throat ere she could speak. “Would it be safe for him to return here?”

“If he does return, it must be at the risk of consequences.”

“Thomas!—Thomas!” she gasped, the thought occurring to her with a sort of shock, “is he in hiding, do you think?”

“I think it likely that he is. He gave you no address, it seems: neither has he sent one to me.”

She drew back to the wall by the mantelpiece, and leaned against it. Every hour seemed to bring forth worse and worse. Thomas gazed with compassion on the haggardness that was seating itself on her sweet face. She was less able to cope with this misery than he. He laid his hand upon her shoulder, speaking in a low tone:

“It is a fiery trial for both of us, Maria: one hard to encounter. God alone can help us to bear it. Be very sure that He will help!”

He went out, taking his way on foot to Ashlydyat. There was greater grief there, if possible, than at the bank. The news touching the bonds, unhappily afloat at Prior’s Ash, had penetrated an hour ago to Ashlydyat. Janet and Bessy were in the room when he entered. Janet lifted her severe face.

“Was George mad?” she asked, scarcely above a whisper. “It were better that he had been.”

Thomas sat down wearily. He had heard so much of

the troubles all day that a little respite from having to speak of them would have been a merciful relief.

“Is it true that George has gone away?” Bessy asked.

“He left for London on Saturday, Maria says,” was the reply of Thomas.

“Has Maria been an accomplice in his frauds?” severely resumed Janet.

Thomas turned his eyes gravely upon her. Their expression was sufficient answer. “Can you ask it, Janet? She is more to be pitied than any. It would be kind if one of you would go down to see her; she seems very lonely.”

“I cannot,” said Janet. “I should be ashamed for people to see my face abroad in Prior’s Ash.”

“I will go to-morrow,” interposed Bessy. “If Prior’s Ash looks askance at me, it must. What has happened is no fault of mine,” she added, in her customary matter-of-fact manner.

“Will the firm be declared bankrupt?” resumed Janet, after a pause.

“I have been expecting news of it all day,” was Thomas Godolphin’s answer. “Nothing can avert it.”

“Will they bring you in as a participator in George’s crime?” she asked, her voice sounding shrill in her great sorrow. “Will the firm be gone against generally?—or only he?”

“I know nothing,” answered Thomas, his hand shading his eyes as he spoke. “I have not seen Lord Averil. It rests with him. One thing I have felt thankful for all day,” he added, in a quicker tone,—“That Crosse’s name was legally withdrawn: otherwise he would have been in the ruin.”

Yes, Mr. Crosse was safe. Safe from consequences;

and at the present time safe from hearing of the calamity. Though the firm was still familiarly called Godolphin, Crosse, and Godolphin, there was no warranty for it. Mr. Crosse's money and name had been alike withdrawn. He had invested his money in the funds. The small balance lodged in the bank was a mere nothing, though he did lose it, with the rest of the depositors. He was staying for his health in the south of France.

"I am thankful for one thing—that my father did not live to see it," returned Janet. "The shock would have killed him."

"Had he lived, it might never have happened," said Thomas. "George would probably have been more cautious in all ways, with him to be responsible to. And my father might have looked more keenly into things than I have done, and so not have afforded the opportunity for affairs to turn out ill."

Bessy turned to him. "Surely, Thomas, you are not going to blame yourself!

"No—only at moments. Justly speaking, blame cannot be charged upon me."

Justly! No, justly it could not. He was feeling it to his heart's core as he recalled the reminiscences of the day, the reproaches lavished on him. He leaned his brow upon his hand, as one who feels a pain there.

"Oh!" wailed Janet, breaking the silence, "could George not have been contented with ruining us all, without adding to it *this* disgrace? We could have borne poverty; we must bear the wresting from us of Ashlydyat; but how shall we support the stain on the name of Godolphin? I knew that ruin, and terrible ruin, could not be far off; I knew it by the warnings

that I believe came in mercy to prepare us for it ; but I did not cast a thought to crime."

"What has Meta been doing at Lady Godolphin's Folly all day?" asked Bessy, breaking another silence.

Thomas did not answer. He knew nothing of it; was not aware she had been there. Bessy happened to cast her eyes to the window.

"Why! here is Lady Sarah Grame!" she exclaimed. "What an hour for her to be paying visits!"

"I cannot see her," said Janet. "I wonder she should intrude here to-day!"

Lady Sarah Grame, as it appeared, had not come with the intention of intruding on Janet. She asked for Mr. Godolphin. Thomas proceeded to the room where she had been shown. She was not sitting, but pacing to and fro in it; and she turned sharply round and met him as he entered, her face flushed with excitement.

"You were once to have been my son-in-law," she said, abruptly.

Thomas, astonished at the address, invited her to a seat, but made no immediate reply. She would not take the chair.

"I cannot sit," she said. "Mr. Godolphin, you were to have been my son-in-law: you would have been so now, had Ethel lived. Do you consider Ethel to be any link between us still?"

He was quite at a loss what to answer. He did not understand what she meant. Lady Sarah continued:

"If you do; if you retain any fond remembrance of Ethel; you will prove it now. I had seven hundred pounds in your bank. I have been scraping and saving out of my poor yearly income nearly ever since Ethel went; and I had placed it there. Can you deny it?"

“Dear Lady Sarah, what is the matter?” he asked; for her excitement was something frightful. “I know you had it there. Why should I deny it?”

“Oh, that’s right. People have been saying the bank was going to repudiate all claims. I want you to give it me. Now: privately.”

“It is impossible for me to do so, Lady Sarah——”

“I cannot lose it; I have been saving it up for my poor child,” she interrupted, in a most excited tone. “She will not have much when I am dead. Would you be so cruel as to rob the widow and the orphan?”

“Not willingly. Never willingly,” he answered, in his pain. “I had thought, Lady Sarah, that though all the world misjudged me, you would not.”

“Could you not, you who were to have married Ethel, have given me a private hint of it when you found the bank was going wrong? Others may afford to lose their money, but I cannot.”

“I did not know it was going wrong,” he said. “The blow has fallen upon me as unexpectedly as it has upon others.”

Lady Sarah Grame, giving vent to one of the fits of passionate excitement to which she had all her life been subject, suddenly flung herself upon her knees before Thomas Godolphin. She implored him to return the money, to avert “ruin” from Sarah Anne; she reproached him with selfishness, with dishonesty, all in a breath. Can you imagine what it was for Thomas Godolphin to meet this? Upright, gifted with lively conscientiousness, tenderly considerate in rendering strict justice to others, as he had been all his life, these unmerited reproaches were as the iron entering into his soul.

— Which was the most to be pitied, himself or Maria?

Thomas had called the calamity by its right name—a fiery trial. It was indeed such: to him and to her. You, who read, cannot picture it. How he got rid of Lady Sarah, he could scarcely tell: he believed it was by her passion spending itself out. She was completely beside herself that night, almost as one who verges on insanity, and Thomas found a moment to ask himself whether that ill-controlled woman could be the mother of gentle Ethel. Her loud voice and its reproaches penetrated to the household—an additional drop of bitterness in the cup of the master of Ashlydyat.

But we must go back to Maria, for it is with her this evening that we have most to do. Between seven and eight o'clock Miss Meta arrived, attended by Charlotte Pain. Meta was in the highest of glee. She was laden with toys and sweetmeats; she carried a doll as big as herself; she had been out in the carriage; she had had a ride on Mrs. Pain's brown horse, held on by that lady; she had swung "above the tops of the trees;" and, more than all, a message had come from the keeper of the dogs in the pit-hole, to say that they were never, never coming out again.

Charlotte had been generously kind to the child; that was evident: and Maria thanked her with her eyes and heart. As to paying much of thanks in words, that was nearly beyond Maria to-night.

"Where's Margery?" asked Meta, in a hurry to show off her treasures.

Margery had not returned. And there was no other train now from the direction she had gone. It was supposed that she had missed it, and would be home in the morning. Meta drew a long face: she wanted Margery to admire the doll.

"You can go and show it to Harriet, dear," said

Maria. "She is in the nursery." And Meta flew away, dragging the doll and as many other encumbrances as she could carry.

"Have you heard from George?" asked Charlotte.

"It is Monday," replied Maria, in answer

"You might have heard by the day mail. You will be sure to hear soon. Don't fret yourself into fiddle-strings. You are beginning to look downright ill."

Maria made no reply. She would have to look worse yet, for this was only the shadow of the beginning. Charlotte turned and glanced round the room

"Have those bankrupt men been here?"

"No. I have seen nothing of them."

"Well now, there's time yet, and do for goodness' sake let me save some few trifles for you," heartily returned Charlotte. "I am quite sure you must have some treasures that it would be grief to part with. I have been thinking all day long how foolishly scrupulous you are."

Maria was silent for a minute. "They look into everything, you say?" she asked.

"*Look* into everything!" echoed Charlotte. "I should think they do! That would be little. They take everything."

Maria left the room and came back with a parcel in her hand. It was a very small trunk—dolls' trunks they are sometimes called—covered with red morocco leather, with a miniature lock.

"I would save this," she said, in a whisper, "if you would be so kind as to take care of it for me. I should not like them to look into it. It cannot be any fraud," she added, in a sort of apology for what she was doing. "The things inside would not sell for sixpence, so I do not think even Mr. Godolphin would be angry with me."

Charlotte nodded, took up her dress, and contrived to thrust the trunk into a huge pocket underneath her crinoline. There was another on the other side. "I put them on on purpose," she said, alluding to the pockets. "I thought you might think better of it by this evening. But this is nothing, Mrs. George Godolphin. You may as well give me something else. They'll be in to-morrow morning for certain."

Maria replied that she had nothing else to give, and Charlotte rose, saying she should come or send for Meta again on the morrow. As she went out, and proceeded up Crosse-street on her way home, she tossed her head with a laugh.

"I thought she'd come to! As if she'd not like to save her jewels as other people do! She's only rather more sly over it—saying what she has given me would not fetch sixpence! You may tell that to the geese, Mrs. George Godolphin! I should like to see what's inside. I think I will."

And Charlotte put her wish into action. Upon reaching Lady Godolphin's Folly, she flung off her bonnet and mantle, gathered together all the small keys in the house, and had little difficulty in opening the simple lock. The contents were exposed to view. A lock of hair of each of her children who had died, wrapped in separate pieces of paper, with the age of the child and the date of its death written respectively outside. A golden lock of Meta's; a fair curl of George's; half a dozen of his letters to her, written in the short space of time that intervened between their engagement and their marriage, and a sort of memorandum of their engagement. "I was this day engaged to George Godolphin. I pray God to render me worthy of him! to be to him a loving and dutiful wife."

Charlotte's eyes opened to their utmost width, but there was nothing else to see; nothing save the printed paper with which the trunk was lined. "*Is* she a fool, that Maria Godolphin!" ejaculated Charlotte. Certainly that was not the class of things Mrs. Pain would have saved from a bankruptcy. And she solaced her feelings by reading Mr. George's love-letters.

No, Maria was not a fool. Better that she had come under that denomination just now, for she would have felt her position less keenly. Charlotte, perhaps, might have found it difficult to believe that Maria Godolphin was one of those who are sensitively intellectual, to a degree that Mistress Charlotte herself could form little notion of.

It is upon these highly-endowed natures that sorrow tells. And the sorrow must be borne in silence. In the midst of her great misery, so great as to be almost irrepressible, Maria contrived to maintain a calm exterior to the world, even to Charlotte and her outspoken sympathy. The first tears that had been wrung from her she shed that night over Meta. When the child came to her for her good-night kiss, and to say her prayers, Maria was utterly unhinged. She clasped the little thing to her heart and burst into a storm of sobs.

Meta was frightened.

Mamma! mamma! What was the matter with mamma?

Maria was unable to answer. The sobs were choking her. Was the child's inheritance going to be that of shame? Maria had grieved bitterly when her other children died: she was now feeling that it might have been a mercy had this dear one also been taken. She covered the little face with kisses as she held it against her beating heart. Presently she grew calm enough to speak.

“Mamma’s not well this evening, darling.”

Once more, as on the previous nights, Maria had to drag herself up to her weary bed. As she fell upon her knees by the bedside, she seemed to pray almost against faith and hope. “Father! all things are possible to Thee. Be with me in Thy mercy this night, and help me to pass through it!”

She saw not how she could pass through it. “Oh! when will the night be gone!” broke incessantly from her bruised heart. Bitterly cold, as before, was she; a sensation of chilly trembling was in every limb; but her head and brain seemed burning, her lips were dry, and that painful nervous affection, the result of excessive anguish, was attacking her throat. Maria had never yet experienced that, and thought she was about to be visited by some strange malady. It was a dreadful night of pain, of apprehension, of *cold*; inwardly and outwardly she trembled as she lay through it. One terrible word kept beating its sound on the room’s air — *transportation*. Was her husband in danger of it? Just before daylight she dropped asleep, and for half an hour slept heavily; but with the full dawn of day she was awake again. Not for the first minute was she conscious of reality; but, the next, the full tide of recollection had burst upon her. With a low cry of despair she leaped from her bed, and began pacing the carpet, all but unable to support the surging waves of mental anguish which rose up one by one and threatened to overmaster her reason. Insanity, had it come on, might have been then more of a relief than a calamity to Maria Godolphin.

“How shall I live through the day? how shall I live through the day?” were the words that broke from her lips. And she fell down by the bedside, and lifted her

hands and her heart on high, and wailed out a cry to God to help her to get through it. Of her own strength, she truly believed that she could not.

She would certainly have need of some help, if she were to bear it patiently. At seven o'clock a peal of muffled bells burst over the town, deafening her ears. Some mauvais sujets, discontented sufferers, had gone to the belfry of St. Mark's church, and set them ringing for the calamity which had overtaken Prior's Ash, in the stoppage of the house of Godolphin.

CHAPTER II.

“SHE’S AS FINE AS A QUEEN!”

“Is Mrs. George Godolphin within?”

The inquiry came from Grace Akeman. She put it in a sharp, angry tone, something like the sharp and angry peal she had just rung on the hall bell. Pierce answered in the affirmative, and showed her in.

The house seemed gloomy and still, as one in a state of bankruptcy does seem. Mrs. Akeman thought so as she crossed the hall. The days had gone on to the Thursday, the bankruptcy had been declared, and those pleasant visitors, foretold by Charlotte Pain, had entered on their duties at the bank and at Ashlydyat. Fearfully ill looked Maria: dark circles had formed under her eyes, her face had lost its bloom, and an expression as of some ever-present dread had seated itself upon her features. When Pierce opened the door to usher in her sister, she started palpably.

Things, with regard to George Godolphin, remained as they were. He had not made his appearance at Prior’s Ash, and Thomas did not know where to write to him. *Maria did*. She had heard from him on the Tuesday morning. His letter was written apparently in the gayest of spirits. The contrast that was presented between his state of mind (if the tone of the letter

might be trusted) and Maria's, was something marvellous. A curiosity in metaphysics, as pertaining to the spiritual organisation of humanity. He sent gay messages to Meta, he sent teasing ones to Margery, he never so much as hinted to Maria that he had a knowledge of anything being wrong. He should soon be home, he said; but meanwhile Maria was to write him word all news, and address the letter under cover to Mr. Verrall. But she was not to give that address to any one. George Godolphin knew he could rely upon the good faith of his wife. He wrote also to his brother: a letter which Thomas burnt as soon as read. Probably it was intended for his eye alone. But he expressed no wish to hear from Thomas; neither did he say how a letter might reach him. He may have felt himself in the light of a guilty schoolboy, who knows he merits a lecture, and would escape from it as long as may be. Maria's suspense was nearly unbearable—and Lord Averil had given no sign of what his intentions might be.

Seeing it was her sister who entered, she turned to her with a sort of relief. "Oh, Grace!" she said, "I thought I was never going to see any of you again."

Grace would not meet the offered hand. Never much given to ceremony, she often came in and went out without giving hers. But this time Grace had come in anger. She blamed Maria for what had occurred, almost as much as she blamed George. Not of the highly refined organisation that Maria was, Grace possessed far keener penetration. Had her husband been going wrong, Grace would inevitably have discovered it; and she could not believe but that Maria must have suspected George Godolphin. In her angry feeling against George, whom she had never liked, Grace would have

deemed it right that Maria should denounce him. Whether she had been wilfully blind, or really blind, Grace alike despised her for it. “I shall not spare her when I see her,” Grace said to her husband: and she did not mean to spare her, now she had come.

“I have intruded here to ask if you will go to the rectory and see mamma,” Grace began. “She is not well, and cannot come to you.”

Grace’s manner was strangely cold and stern. And Maria did not like the word “intruded.” “I am glad to see you,” she replied, in a gentle voice. “It is very dull here now. Nobody has been near me, except Bessy Godolphin.”

“You cannot expect many visitors,” said Grace, in her hard manner—very hard to-day.

“I do not think I could see them if they came,” was Maria’s answer. “I was not speaking of visitors. Is mamma ill?”

“Yes, she is; and little wonder,” replied Grace. “I almost wish I was not married, now this misfortune has fallen upon us: it would at any rate be another pair of hands in the rectory, and I am more capable of work than is mamma or Rose. But I am married; and of course my place must be my husband’s home.”

“What do you mean by another pair of hands, Grace?”

“There are going to be changes at the rectory,” returned Grace, staring at the wall behind Maria, apparently to avoid looking at her. “One servant only is to be retained, and the two little Chisholm girls are coming there to be kept and educated. Mamma will have all the care upon her; she and Rose must both work and teach. Papa will keep the little boy at school, and have him home in the holidays, to make more trouble at the

rectory. They, papa and mamma, will have to pinch and screw; they must deprive themselves of every comfort; bare necessaries alone must be theirs; and, all that can be saved from their income will be put by towards repaying the trust-money."

"Is this decided?" asked Maria, in a low tone.

"It is decided so far as papa can decide anything," sharply rejoined Grace. "If the law is put in force against him, by his co-trustee, for the recovery of the money, he does not know what he would do. Possibly the living would have to be sequestered."

Maria did not speak. What Grace was saying was all too true and terrible. Grace flung up her hand with a passionate movement.

"Had I been the one to bring this upon my father and mother, Maria, I should wish I had been out of the world before it had been done."

"I did not bring it upon them, Grace," was Maria's scarcely-breathed answer.

"Yes, you did. Maria, I have come here to speak my mind, and I must speak it. I may seem hard, but I can't help it. How could you, for shame, let papa pay in that money, the nine thousand pounds? If you and George Godolphin must have flaunted your state and your expense in the eyes of the world, and ruined people to do it, you might have spared your father and mother."

"Grace! why do you blame *me*?"

Mrs. Akeman rose from her chair and began pacing the room. She did not speak in a loud tone; not so much in an angry one, as in a clear, sharp, decisive one. It was just the tone used by the rector of All Souls' when in his cynical moods.

"He has been a respected man all his life; he has kept up his position——"

“Of whom do you speak?” interrupted Maria, really not sure whether she was applying the words satirically to George Godolphin.

“Of whom do I speak!” retorted Grace. “Of your father and mine. I say he has been a respected man all his life; has maintained his position as a clergyman and a gentleman, has reared his children suitably, has exercised moderate hospitality at the rectory, and yet was putting something by that we might have a few pounds, each, at his death, to help us on in the world. Not one of his children but wants helping on: save the grand wife of Mr. George Godolphin.”

“Grace! Grace!”

“And what have you brought him to?” continued Grace, lifting her hand in token that she would have out her say. “To poverty in his old age—he is getting old, Maria—to trouble, to care, to privation; perhaps to disgrace as a false trustee. *I* would have sacrificed my husband, rather than my father.”

Maria lifted her aching head. The reproaches were cruel; and yet they told home. It *was* her husband who had ruined her father: and, it may be said, ruined him deliberately. Grace resumed, answering the last thought almost as if she had divined it.

“If ever a shameless fraud was committed upon another, George Godolphin wilfully committed it when he took that nine thousand pounds. Prior’s Ash may well be calling him a swindler!”

“Oh, Grace, don’t!” she said, imploringly. “He could not have known that it was unsafe to take it.”

Whatever his faults, it was Maria’s duty to defend him against the world.

“Could not have known!” indignantly returned Grace. “You are either a fool, Maria, or you are de-

liberately saying what you know to be untrue. You must be aware that he never entered it in the books—that he appropriated it to his own use. He is a heartless, bad man! He might have chosen somebody else to play upon, rather than his wife's father. Were I papa, I should prosecute him."

"Grace, you are killing me," wailed Maria. "Don't you think I have enough to bear?"

"I make no doubt you have. I should be sorry to have to bear the half. But you have brought it upon yourself, Maria. What though George Godolphin was your husband, you need not have upheld him in his course. Look at the ruin that has fallen upon Prior's Ash! I can tell you that your name and George Godolphin's will be remembered for many a long day. But it won't be with a blessing!"

"Grace," she said, lifting her streaming eyes, for tears had at length come to her relief, "have you no pity for me?"

"What pity have you had for others?" was Grace Akeman's retort. "How many must go down to their graves steeped in poverty, who, but for George Godolphin's treachery, would have passed the rest of their lives in comfort! You have been a blind simpleton, and nothing else. George Godolphin has lavished his money and his attentions broadcast elsewhere, and you have looked complacently on. Do you think Prior's Ash has had its eyes closed, as you have? But it ought to have told what was gathering."

"What do you mean, Grace?"

"Never mind what I mean," was Grace's answer. "I am not going to tell you what you might have seen for yourself. It is all of a piece. If people will marry gay and attractive men, they must pay for it."

Maria remained silent. Grace also for a time. Then she ceased her walking, and sat down opposite her sister.

“I came to ask you whether it is not your intention to go down and see mamma. She is in bed. Suffering from a violent cold, she says. *I* know; suffering from anguish of mind. If you would not add ingratitude to what has passed, you will pay her a visit to-day. She wishes to see you.”

“I will go,” said Maria. But as she spoke the words, the knowledge that it would be a fearful trial—the showing herself in the streets of the town—was very present to her. “I will go to-day, Grace.”

“Very well,” said Grace, rising; “that’s all I came for.”

“Not quite all, Grace. You came, I think, to make me more unhappy than I was.”

“I cannot gloss over facts; it is not in my nature,” was the reply of Grace. “If black is black, I must call it black; and white, white. I have not said all I could say, Maria. I have not spoken of our loss; a very paltry one, but a good deal to us. I have not alluded to other and worse rumours, touching your husband. I have spoken of the ruin brought on our father and mother, and I hold you nearly as responsible for it as George Godolphin. Where’s Meta?” she added, after a short pause.

“At Lady Godolphin’s Folly. Mrs. Pain has been very kind——”

Grace turned sharply round. “And you can let her go *there!*”

“Mrs. Pain has been kind, I say, in coming for her. This is but a dull house now for Meta. Margery went out on Monday, and has been detained by her sister’s illness.”

“Let Meta come to me if you want to get her out,” returned Grace, in a tone more stern than any that had gone before it. “If you knew the free comments indulged in by the public, you would not let a child of yours be at Lady Godolphin’s Folly, while Charlotte Pain inhabits it.”

Somehow, Maria had not the courage to inquire more particularly as to the “comments:” it was a subject that she shrank from, though vague and uncertain at the best. Mrs. Akeman went out; and Maria, the strings of her grief loosened, sat down and cried as if her heart would break.

With quite a sick feeling of dread she dressed herself to go to the rectory. But not until later in the day. She put it off, and put it off, with some faint wish, foolish and vain, that dusk would forestal its usual hour of approach. The western sun, drawing towards its setting, streamed full on the street of Prior’s Ash as she walked down it. Walked down it, almost like a criminal, her black veil over her face, flushed with its sensitive dread. Nobody but herself knew how she shrank from the eyes of her fellow-creatures.

She might have ordered the close carriage and gone down in it—for the carriages and horses were yet at her disposal for use. But that, to Maria, would have been worse. To go out in state in her carriage, attended by her men-servants, would have seemed more brazenly defiant of public feelings than to appear on foot. Were these feelings ultra-sensitive? absurd? Not altogether. At any rate, I am relating the simple truth—the facts as they occurred—the feelings that actuated her.

“Look at her, walking there! She’s as fine as a queen!” The words, in an insolent, sneering tone, caught her ear as she passed a group, a low group

gathered at the corner of a street. They would not be likely to come from any other. That they were directed to her there was no doubt; and Maria’s ears tingled as she hastened on.

Was she so fine? she could not help asking herself. She had put on the plainest things she had. A black silk dress and a black mantle, a white silk bonnet and the black veil. All good things, certainly, but plain, and not new. She began to feel that reproaches were cast upon her, which she did *not* deserve: but they were not the less telling upon her heart.

Did she dread going into the rectory? Did she dread the reproaches she might be met with there?—the coldness? the slights? If so, she did not find them. She was met by the most considerate kindness, and perhaps it wrung her heart all the more.

They had seen her coming, and Rose ran forward to meet her in the hall, and kissed her; Reginald came boisterously out with a welcome; a chart in one hand, parallel-rulers and a pair of compasses in the other: he was making a pretence of work, was pricking off a ship’s place in the chart. The rector and Isaac were not at home.

“Is mamma in bed?” she asked of Rose.

“Yes. But her cold is better this evening. She will be so glad to see you.”

Maria went up the stairs and entered the room alone. The anxious look of care, of trouble on Mrs. Hastings’ face, its feverish hue, struck her forcibly, as she advanced with timidity, uncertain of her reception. Uncertain of the reception of a mother? With an eagerly fond look, a rapid gesture of love, Mrs. Hastings drew Maria’s face down to her for an embrace.

It unhinged Maria. She fell on her knees at the side

of the bed, and gave vent to a passionate flood of tears. "Oh mother, mother, I could not help it!" she wailed. "It has been no fault of mine."

Mrs. Hastings did not speak. She laid her arm round Maria's neck, and let it rest there. But the sobs redoubled.

"Don't, child!" she said, then. "You will make yourself ill. My poor child!"

"I am ill, mamma; I think I shall never be well again," sobbed Maria, forgetting some of her reticence. "I feel sometimes that it would be a relief to die."

"Hush, my love! Keep despair from you, whatever you do."

"I could bear it better but for the thought of you and papa. That is killing me. Indeed, indeed I have not deserved the blame thrown upon me. I knew nothing of what was happening."

"My dear, we have not blamed *you*."

"Oh yes, everybody blames me!" wailed Maria. "And I know how sad it is for you all—to suffer by us. It breaks my heart to think of it. Mamma, do you know I dreamt last night that a great shower of gold was falling down to me, faster than I could catch it in my two hands. Such heaps of sovereigns! I thought I was going to pay everybody, and I ran away laughing, oh so glad! and held out some to papa. 'Take them,' I said to him, 'they are slipping through my fingers.' I fell down when I was close to him, and awoke. I awoke—and—then"—she could scarcely speak for sobs—"I remembered. Mamma, but for Meta, I *should* have been glad in that moment to die."

The emotion of both was very great, nearly overpowering Maria. Mrs. Hastings could not say much of comfort, she was too prostrated herself. Anxious as

she had been to see Maria—for she could not bear the thought of her being left alone and unnoticed in her distress—she almost repented having sent for her. Neither was strong enough to bear this excess of agitation.

Not a word was spoken of George Godolphin. Mrs. Hastings did not mention him; Maria could not. The rest of the interview was mostly spent in silence, Maria holding her mother’s hand and giving way to a rising sob now and then. Into the affairs of the bank Mrs. Hastings felt that she could not enter. There must be a wall of silence between them on that point, as on the subject of George.

At the foot of the stairs, as she went down, she met her father. “Oh, is it you, Maria!” he said. “How are you?”

His tone was a kind one. But Maria’s heart was full, and she could not answer. He turned into the room by which they were standing, and she went in after him.

“When is your husband coming back? I suppose you don’t know?”

“No,” she answered, obliged to confess to it.

“My opinion is, it would be better for him to face it, than to remain away,” said the rector. “A more honourable course, at any rate.”

Still there was no reply. And Mr. Hastings, looking at his daughter’s face in the twilight of the evening, saw that it was working with emotion; that she was striving, almost in vain, to repress her feelings.

“It must be very dull for you at the bank now, Maria,” he resumed, in a gentle tone: “dull and unpleasant. Will you come to the rectory for a week or two, and bring Meta?”

The tears streamed from her eyes then, unrepressed. "Thank you, papa! thank you for all your kindness," she answered, striving not to choke. "But I must stay at home as long as I may."

She turned again to the hall, murmuring something to the effect that it was late, and she must be departing. "Who is going to walk with you?" asked the rector.

"I will," cried out Reginald, who heard the question, and came forth from another room.

They departed together. Reginald talking gaily, as if there were not such a thing as care in the world; Maria unable to answer him. The pain in her throat was worse than usual then. In turning out at the rectory gate, whom should they come upon but old Jekyl, walking slowly along, nearly bent double with rheumatism. Reginald accosted him.

"Why, old Jekyl! it's never you! Are you in the land of the living, yet?"

"Ay, it's me, sir. Old bones don't get laid so easy; in spite, maybe, of their wishing it. Ma'am," added the old man, turning to Maria, "I'd like to make bold to say a word to you. That sixty pound of mine, what was put in the bank—you mind it?"

"Yes," said Maria, faintly.

"The losing of it 'll be just dead ruin to me, ma'am. I lost my bees last summer, as you heard on, and that bit o' money was all, like, I had to look to. One must have a crust o' bread and a sup o' tea as long as it pleases the Almighty to keep one above ground: one can't lie down and clam. Would you be pleased just to say a word to the gentlemen, that that trifle o' money mayn't be lost to me? Mr. Godolphin will listen to you."

Maria scarcely knew what to answer. She had not

the courage to tell him the money was lost; she did not like to raise unjustifiable hopes by saying it might be saved.

Old Jekyl interpreted the hesitation wrongly. “It was you yourself, ma’am, as advised my putting it there; for myself I shouldn’t have had a thought on’t: surely you won’t object to say a word for me, that I mayn’t lose it now. My two sons, David and Jonathan, come home one day when they had been a working at your house, and telled me, both of ’em, that you recommended me to take my money to the bank; that it would be safe and sure. I *can’t* afford to lose it,” he added, in a pitiful tone; “it’s all my subsistence on this side o’ the grave.”

“Of course she’ll speak to them, Jekyl,” interposed Reginald, answering for Maria just as freely and lightly as he would have answered for himself. “I’ll speak to Mr. George Godolphin for you when he comes home; I don’t mind; I can say anything to him. It would be too bad for you to lose it. Good-evening. Don’t go pitch-polling over! you have not got your sea-legs on to-night.”

The feeble old man continued his way, a profusion of hearty thanks breaking from him. They fell on Maria’s heart like a knell. Old Jekyl’s money had as surely gone as had the rest! And but for her, it might never have been placed in the bank of the Godolphins.

She turned to drag herself home again, there to pass her usual night of pain. To wail out, on retiring to her chamber, “Oh! when will the night be gone?” To rise up in the morning to the anguished cry, “How shall I live through the day?”

CHAPTER III.

MARGERY'S TONGUE LET LOOSE.

THE lamps in the streets were lighted then, and people were passing to and fro on their usual evening occupations. Maria bent her head as if she would shun observation and walked quickly; Reginald, in his sailor's jacket swung along, nodding to everybody he knew. Recent events reflected no shame on *him*. And if they had reflected it, Reginald Hastings was not one to take the shame to himself.

"What's the matter?" cried he freely to a group, through whom they had to push their way along the pavement. "Anybody down in a fit?"

"Old Byles is a shutting up of his shop for good," came the answer. "Mr. George Godolphin have had his money, so he says it's of no use for him to try to keep open; he may as well go right off into the workus."

Pleasant hearing for Maria! This Byles kept a general shop, and they did owe him something considerable, for the servants were in the habit of running there when stores ran short at home. The man's savings, also, had been in the bank. He was accustomed to get tipsy every night; and, when in that

state, would hold forth at his door upon the subject of his grievances to the listeners who collected round it. It was long since he had had such a grievance as this.

“Bah!” cried Reginald. “He’ll be all right in the morning.”

“Come along, Reginald,” whispered Maria, in fear lest the crowd should recognize, perhaps insult her. And they walked on: her head bent lower; Reginald’s turned back with a laugh.

When they arrived at the bank, Reginald gave a flourish on the knocker enough to knock it flat, pulled the bell with a peal that alarmed the servants, and then made off with a hasty good-night, leaving Maria standing there alone, in his careless fashion. Possibly he was anticipating some fun with old Byles. At the same moment there advanced from the opposite direction a woman carrying a brown-paper parcel.

It was Margery. Detained at the place where she had gone to meet her sister by that sister’s sudden illness, she had been unable to return until now. It had put Margery out considerably, and altogether she had come home in anything but a genial humour.

“I knowed there’d be nothing lucky in the journey,” she grumblingly cried, in reply to Maria’s salutation of welcome. “The night afore I started I was stuck in the midst of a muddy pool all night in my dream, and couldn’t get out of it.”

“Is your sister better?” asked Maria.

“She’s better; and gone on into Wales. But she’s the poorest creature I ever saw. Is all well at home, ma’am?”

“All well,” replied Maria, the tone of her voice a subdued one, as she thought how different it was in one sense from “well.”

"And how has Harriet managed with the child?" continued Margery, in a tart tone, meant for the unconscious Harriet.

"Very well indeed," answered Maria. "Quite well."

The door had been opened, and they were then crossing the hall. Maria turned into the dining-room, and Margery continued her way up-stairs, grunting as she did so. To believe that Harriet, or anybody else, herself excepted, could do "quite well" by Meta, was a stretch of credulity utterly inadmissible to Margery's biassed mind. In the nursery sat Harriet, a damsel in a smart cap with flying pink ribbons.

"What, is it you!" was her salutation to Margery. "We thought you had taken up your abode yonder for good."

"Did you?" said Margery. "What else did you think?"

"And your sister, poor dear!" continued Harriet, passing by the retort and speaking in a sympathising tone, for she generally found it to her interest to keep friends with Margery. "Is she got well?"

"As well as she ever will get, I suppose," was Margery's crusty answer.

She sat down, untied her bonnet and threw it off, and unpinned her shawl. Harriet snuffed the candle and resumed her work, which appeared to be the sewing of tapes on a pinafore of Meta's.

"Has she tore 'em off again?" asked Margery, her eyes following the progress of the needle.

"She's always tearing them off," responded Harriet, biting the end of her thread.

"And how's things going on here?" demanded Margery, her voice assuming a confidential tone, as she drew her chair nearer to Harriet's. "The bank's

not opened again, I find, for I asked so much at the station."

"Things couldn't be worse," said Harriet. "It's all a smash together. The house is bankrupt."

"Lord help us!" ejaculated Margery.

Harriet let her work fall on the table, and leaned her head towards Margery's, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"I say! We have got a man in here!"

"In here!" breathlessly rejoined Margery.

Harriet nodded. "Since last Tuesday. There's one stopping here, and there's another at Ashlydyat. Margery, I declare to you when they were going through the house, them creatures, I felt that sick, that I could have heaved my inside right out. If I had dared, I'd have upset a bucket of boiling water over the lot as they came up the stairs."

Margery sat, revolving the news, a terribly blank look upon her face. Harriet resumed:

"We shall all have to leave, every soul of us: and soon, too, we expect. I don't know about you, you know. I am so sorry for my mistress!"

"Well!" burst forth Margery, giving vent to her indignation, "*he* has brought matters to a fine pass!"

"Meaning master?" asked Harriet.

"Meaning nobody else," was the tart rejoinder.

"He just has," said Harriet. "Prior's Ash is saying such things that it raises one's hair to hear it. We don't like to repeat them again only just among ourselves."

"What's the drift of 'em?" inquired Margery.

"There's all sorts of drifts. About his having took and made away with the money in the tills: and those bonds of my Lord Averil's, that there was so much

looking after—it was he took them. Who'd have believed it, Margery, of Mr. George Godolphin, with his gay laugh and his handsome face?"

"Better for him if his laugh had been a bit less gay and his face less handsome," was the sharp remark of Margery. "He might have been steadier then."

"Folks talk of the Verralls, and that set, up at Lady Godolphin's Folly," rejoined Harriet, her voice falling still lower. "Prior's Ash says he has had too much to do with them, and——"

"I don't want that scandal repeated over to me," angrily reprimanded Margery. "Perhaps other people know as much about it as Prior's Ash; they have got eyes, I suppose. There's no need for you to bring it up to one's face."

"But they talk chiefly about Mr. Verrall," persisted Harriet, with a stress upon the name. "It's said that he and master have had business dealings together of some sort, and that that's where the money's gone. I was not going to bring up anything else. The man down-stairs—and upon my word, Margery, he's a decent man enough, if you can only forget who he is—says that there are thousands and thousands gone into Verrall's pockets, which ought to be in master's."

"They'd ruin a saint, and I have always said it," was Margery's angry remark. "See *her* tearing about with her horses and her carriages, in her feathers and her brass; and master at her tail, after her! Many's the time I've wondered that Mr. Godolphin has put up with it. I'd have given him a word of a sort, if I had been his brother."

"I should if I had been his wife——" Harriet was beginning, but Margery fiercely arrested her. Her own tongue might be guilty of as many slips as it chose in

the forgetful heat of argument; but it was high treason for Harriet's to lapse into one.

"You hold your sauce, will you, girl! How dare you bring your mistress's name up in any such thing? I don't know what you mean, for my part. When she complains of her husband, it'll be time enough then for you to take up the chorus. Could you wish to see a better husband, pray?"

"He's quite a model husband—to her face," replied saucy Harriet. "And the old saying's a true one: What the eye don't see, the heart won't rue. Where's the need for us to quarrel over it?" she added, picking up her work again. "You have got your opinion and I have got mine, and if they were laid naked side by side, it's likely they'd not be far apart from each other. But let them be bad or good, opposite or favourable, it can't make any change in the past. What's done, is done; and the house is broken up."

Margery flung her shawl off her shoulders, in the jerking way that Charlotte Pain had flung off hers, the previous Monday morning, in the breakfast-room, and a silence ensued.

"Perhaps the house may go on again?" said Margery, presently, in a dreamy tone.

"Why, how can it?" returned Harriet, looking up from her work at the pinafore, which she had resumed. "All the money's gone. A bank can't go on without money."

"What does he say to it?" very sharply asked Margery.

"What does who say to it?"

"Master. Does *he* say how the money comes to be gone? How does he like facing the creditors?"

"He is not here," said Harriet. "He has not been

home since he left last Saturday. It's said he is in London."

"And Mr. Godolphin?"

"Mr. Godolphin's here. And a nice task of it he has every day, with the angry creditors. If we have had one of the bank creditors bothering at the hall-door for Mr. George, we have had fifty. At first, they'd not believe he was away, and wouldn't be got rid of. Creditors of the house, too, have come, worrying my mistress out of her life."

"Why need they worry her?" wrathfully asked Margery.

"They must see somebody: and Mr. George is not here to be seen."

"Then he ought to be," snapped Margery.

"So he ought. There's a sight of money owing in the town. Cook says she'd not have believed there was a quarter of the amount only just for household things, till it came to be summed up. Some of them downstairs are wondering if they will get their wages. And—I say, Margery, have you heard about Mr. Hastings?"

"What about him?" asked Margery.

"He has lost every shilling he had. It was in the bank, and——"

"He couldn't have had so very much to lose," interposed Margery, who was in the humour to contradict everything. "What can a parson save? Not much."

"But it is not that—*his* money. The week before the bank went, he had lodged between nine and ten thousand pounds in it for safety. He was left trustee, you know, to dead Mr. Chisholm's children, and their money was paid to him, it turns out, and he brought it to the bank. It's all gone."

- Margery lifted her hands in dismay. "I have heard

say that failures is like nothing but a devouring fire, for the money they swallow up," she remarked. "It seems it's true."

"My mistress has looked so ill ever since! And she can eat nothing. Pierce says it would melt the heart of a stone to see her make believe to eat before him, and them, waiting at dinner, trying to get a morsel down her throat, and can't. My belief is, that she's thinking of her father's ruin night and day. Report is, that master took the money from the rector, knowing it would never be paid back again."

"It ought to have been paid when the bank went," said Margery.

"But master has used it, they say. That man downstairs seems to know everything. We wonder where he gathers all his news from."

Margery got up with a jerk. "If I stop here I shall be hearing worse and worse," she remarked. "This will be enough to kill Miss Janet. That awful Shadow hasn't been on the Dark Plain this year for nothing. We might well notice that it never was so black!"

Perching her bonnet on her head hind part before, to save the trouble of carrying it, and throwing her shawl over her arm, Margery lighted a candle and opened a door leading from the room into a bed-chamber. Her own bed stood opposite to her, and in a corner at the opposite end was the little bed of Miss Meta. She laid her shawl and bonnet on the drawers, and advanced on tiptoe, shading the light with her hand.

Intending to take a fond look at her darling. But, like many more of us who advance confidently on some pleasure, Margery arrived at nothing but disappointment. The place where Meta ought to have been was empty. Nothing to be seen but the smooth white bed-

clothes, laid ready open for the young lady's reception. Did a fear dart over Margery's mind that she must be lost? She certainly flew back as if some such idea occurred to her.

"Where's the child?" she burst out.

"She has not come home yet," replied Harriet, with composure. "I was waiting here for her."

"Come home from where? Where is she?"

"At Lady Godolphin's Folly. But Mrs. Pain has never kept her so late as this before."

"She's *there!* With Mrs. Pain?" shrieked Margery.

"She has been there every day this week. Mrs. Pain has either come or sent for her. Look there," added Harriet, pointing to a collection of toys in a corner of the nursery. "She has brought home all those things. Mrs. Pain loads her with them."

Margery answered not a word. She blew out the candle, leaving it under Harriet's nose for her benefit, and went down-stairs to the dining-room. Maria, her things never taken off, was sitting just as she had come in, apparently lost in thought. She rose up when Margery entered, and began untying her bonnet.

"Harriet says that the child's at Mrs. Pain's; that she has been let go there all the week," began Margery, without circumlocution.

"Yes," replied Maria. "I cannot think why she has not come home. Mrs. Pain——"

"And you could let her go there, ma'am!" interrupted Margery's indignant voice, paying little heed or deference to what her mistress might be saying. "*There!* If anybody had come and told it to me before this night, I'd not have believed it."

"But, Margery, it has done her no harm. There's a pinafore or two torn, I believe, and that's the worst.

Mrs. Pain has been exceedingly kind. She has kept her dogs shut up all the week."

Margery's face was working ominously. It bore the signs of a brewing storm.

"Kind! She!" repeated Margery, almost beside herself. "Why, then, if it's come to this pass, you had better have your eyes opened, ma'am, if nothing else will stop the child's going there. Your child at Mrs. Charlotte Pain's! Prior's Ash will talk more than it has talked."

"What has Prior's Ash said?" asked Maria, an uncomfortable feeling stealing over her.

"It has wondered whether Mrs. George Godolphin has been wholly blind or only partially so; that's what it has done, ma'am," returned Margery, quite forgetting herself in her irritation. "And the woman coming here continually with her bold face! I'd rather see Meta——"

Margery's eloquence was brought to a summary end. A noise in the hall was followed by the boisterous entrance of the ladies in question, Miss Meta and Mrs. Charlotte Pain. Charlotte—really she was wild at times—had brought Meta home on horseback. Late as it was, she had mounted her horse to give the child pleasure, had mounted the child on the saddle before her, and so they had rode down, attended by a groom. Charlotte wore her habit, and held her whip in her hand. She came in pretending to beat an imaginary horse, for the delectation of Meta. Meta was furnished with a boy's whip, a whistle at one end and a sweeping cord and lash at the other. She was beating an imaginary horse too, varying the play with an occasional whistle. What with the noise, the laughing, the lashes, and the whistle, it was as if Bedlam had broken

loose. To crown the whole, Meta's brown-holland dress had a woful rent in it, and the brim of her straw hat was flapping down, nearly torn from the crown. Margery, in her scandalised feelings, rather wished the floor would come asunder and let everybody into the opening: as the trap-doors swallow up the *diables* and other bad characters at the play. Margery began to think they were all bad together: herself, her mistress, Mrs. Pain, and Meta.

Meta caught sight of Margery and flew to her. But not before Margery had made a sort of grab at the child. Claspng her in her arms, she held her there, as if she would protect her from some infection. To be clasped in arms, however, and thus deprived of the delights of whip-smacking and whistling, did not accord with the inclinations of Miss Meta, and she struggled to get free.

"You'd best stop here and hide yourself, poor child!" cried Margery, in a voice uncommonly pointed.

"It's not much," said Charlotte, supposing the remark applied to the damages. "The brim is only unsewn, and the blouse is an old one. She did it with the swing."

"Who's talking of that?" fiercely responded Margery to Mrs. Pain. "If folks had to hide their faces for nothing worse than clothes, it wouldn't be of much account."

Charlotte did not like the tone. "Perhaps you will wait until your opinion's asked for," said she, turning haughtily on Margery. There had been incipient warfare between those two for years: and they both were innately conscious of it.

A shrill whistle from Meta interrupted the contest. She had escaped, and was standing in the middle of the

room, her legs astride, her damaged hat set rakishly on the side of her head, her attitude altogether not unlike that of a man standing to see a horse go through his paces. It was precisely what the young lady was imitating: she had been taken by Charlotte to the stable-yard that day, to witness the performance.

Clack, clack! "Heave your feet up, you lazy brute!" Clack, clack, clack! "Mamma, I am making a horse canter."

Charlotte looked on with admiring ecstasy, and clapped her hands to show it. Maria seemed bewildered; Margery stood with dilating eyes and open mouth. There was little doubt that Miss Meta, under the able tuition of Mrs. Pain, might become an exceedingly fast young lady in time.

"You have been teaching her that!" burst forth Margery to Mrs. Pain in her uncontrollable anger. "What else might you have been teaching her? It's fit, it is, for you to be let have the companionship of Miss Maria Godolphin!"

Charlotte laughed in her face defiantly—contemptuously—with a gleeful, merry accent. Margery, perhaps distrustful of what she might be further tempted to say herself, put an end to the scene, by catching up Meta and forcibly carrying her off, in spite of rebellious kicks and screams. In her temper, she flung the whip to the other end of the hall as she passed through it. "They'd make you into a boy, and worse, if they had their way! I wish Miss Janet had been here to-night!"

"What an idiotic old maid she is, that Margery!" exclaimed Charlotte, laughing still. "When did she get home?"

"To-night, not a quarter of an hour ago," replied Maria. "Will you not sit down, Mrs. Pain?"

"I can't; my horse is waiting," replied Charlotte. "I suppose there's nothing fresh to-day?"

"Not that I have heard of. But I think they perhaps keep news from me."

"Well, don't get down-hearted. More perplexing affairs than these have been battled out, and nobody been much the worse. Good-night. I shall come or send for Meta to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow," dissented Maria, feeling that the struggle with Margery would be too formidable. "I thank you very much for your kindness, Mrs. Pain," she heartily added; "but now that Margery has returned, she will not like to part with Meta."

"As you will," said Charlotte, with a laugh. "Margery would not let her come, you think. Good-night. Dormez bien."

Before the sound of the closing of the hall-door had ceased its echoes through the house, Margery was in the dining-room again, her face white with anger. Her mistress, a thing she very rarely did, ventured on a reproof.

"You forgot yourself, Margery, when you spoke just now to Mrs. Pain. I felt inclined to apologise to her for you."

This was the climax. "Forget myself!" echoed Margery, her white face growing whiter. "No, ma'am, it's because I did not forget myself that she's gone out of the house without her ears tingling. I should have made 'em tingle if I had spoke out. Not that some folks's ears can tingle," added Margery, amending her proposition. "Hers is of the number, so I should have spent my words for nothing. If Mr. George had spent *his* words upon somebody else, it might be the better for us all now."

"Margery!"

"I can't help it, ma'am, I must have my say. Heaven knows I'd not have opened my mouth to you; I'd have kept it closed for ever, though I burst over it—and it's not five minutes ago that I pretty well snapped Harriet's nose off for daring to give out hints and to bring up your name—but it's time you did know a little of what has been going on, to the scandal of Prior's Ash. Meta up at Lady Godolphin's Folly with that woman!"

"Margery!" again interrupted her mistress. But Margery's words were as a torrent that bears down all before it.

"It has been the talk of the town; it has been the talk of the servants here; it has been the talk among the servants of Ashlydyat. If I thought you'd let the child go out with her in public again, I'd pray that I might first follow her in her little coffin."

Maria's face had turned as white as Margery's. She sat as a statue, gazing at the woman with eyes in which there shone a strange kind of fear.

"I—don't—know—what—it—is—you—mean," she said, the words coming out in gasps.

"It means, ma'am, that you have lived with a curtain afore your eyes. You have thought my master a saint and a paragon, and he was neither the one nor the other. And now I hope you'll pardon me for saying to your face what others have been long saying behind your back."

Maria made no reply. She passed her handkerchief over her brow, where the drops had gathered.

"Master has been upon the wrong tack this long while," went on Margery, her manner growing somewhat more composed, her tone more in accordance with

reason. "There was her, and there was Verrall, and there was——but it's no good going over it," she broke off. "If we had only had our wits about us, we might have told what it would end in."

She turned sharply off as she concluded, and quitted the room abruptly as she had entered it. Leaving Maria motionless, her breath coming in gasps, and the dewdrops cold on her brow.

The substance of what Margery had spoken out so broadly had sometimes passed through her mind as a dim shadow. But never to rest there.

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER NAIL IN THE COFFIN OF THOMAS GODOLPHIN.

THERE went on the progress of a few days, and another week was in. Every hour brought to light more—what are we to call it—imprudence?—of Mr. George Godolphin's. His friends termed it imprudence; his enemies villany. Thomas called it nothing: he never cast reproach on George by a single word; he would have taken the whole odium upon himself, had it been possible to take it. George's conduct was breaking his heart, was driving him to his grave somewhat before his time; but Thomas never said in the hearing of others—he has been a bad brother to me.

George Godolphin was not yet home. It could not be said that he was in concealment, as he was sometimes met in London by people visiting it. Perhaps he carried his habitual carelessness so far as the perilling of his own safety; and his absence from Prior's Ash may have been the result only of his distaste to meet that ill-used community. Had he been the sole partner, he must have been there, to answer to his bankruptcy; as it was, Thomas, hitherto, had answered all in his own person.

But there came a day when Thomas could not answer it. Ill or well, he rose now to the early break-

fast-table ; he had to hasten to the bank betimes, for there was much work there with the accounts ; and one morning when they were at breakfast, Bexley, his own servant, entered with one or two post letters.

But, before the old man could reach his master, whose back was to the door, Janet made him a sign, and Bexley laid the letters silently down on a remote table. Thomas Godolphin's letters had not latterly been of a soothing or composing nature, whether addressed to the bank or to Ashlydyat ; and Janet deemed it just as well that he should at least sit to his breakfast in peace.

The circumstance of the letters being there passed from Janet's mind. Thomas was silent, but she, Bessy, and Cecil were discussing certain news which they had received the previous day from Lady Godolphin. News which had surprised them. My lady was showing herself to be a true friend. She had announced to them that it was her intention to resume her residence at the Folly, that they "might not be separated from Prior's Ash, the place of their birth and home." Of course it was an intimation, really delicately put, that their future home must be with her. "Never for me," Janet remarked: *her* future residence would not be at Prior's Ash ; as far removed from it as might be. Bessy thought she should rather like it : it would grieve her to quit Prior's Ash. Cecil said nothing.

Busy talking, they did not particularly notice that Thomas had risen from his chair, and was seated at the distant table, opening his letters ; until a faint sound, or moan, startled them. He was leaning back in his chair, seemingly unconscious ; his hands had fallen, his face was the hue of the grave. Surely those dews upon it were not the dews of death ?

Cecil screamed; Bessy flung open the door and called out for help; Janet only turned to them, her hands lifted to enjoin silence, a warning word upon her lips. Bexley came running in, and looked at his master.

“He’ll be better presently,” he whispered.

“Yes, he will be better presently,” assented Janet.

“But I should like Mr. Snow to be here.”

Bexley was the only man-servant left at Ashlydyat. Short work is generally made of the dispersion of a household when the means come to a summary end, as they had with the Godolphins: and there had been no difficulty in finding places for the valuable servants of Ashlydyat. Bexley had stoutly refused to go. He didn’t want wages, he said, but he was not going to leave his master, so long as—— Bexley did not say so long as what, but they had understood him. So long as his master was in life.

Thomas began to revive. He slowly opened his eyes, and raised his hand to wipe the moisture from his white face. On the table before him lay one of the letters open. Janet recognized the handwriting to be that of George.

She spurned the letter from her. With a gesture of grievous vexation, her hand pushed it across the table. “It is that which has affected you!” she cried out, with a wail.

“Not so,” breathed Thomas. “It was the pain here.”

He touched himself below the chest; considerably lower; in the same place where the pain had come before. *Which* pain had taken him?—the mental agony arising from George’s conduct, or the physical agony of his disease? Probably somewhat of both.

He stretched out his hand towards the letter, making a motion that it should be folded. Bexley, who

could not have read a word without his glasses had it been to save his life, took up the letter, folded it, and placed it in its envelope. Thomas's mind then seemed at rest, and he closed his eyes again.

"I'll step for Mr. Snow now, ma'am," whispered Bexley to Janet. "I shall catch him before he goes out on his round."

Mr. Snow soon reached Ashlydyat: doctors' legs get over the ground quick. Janet saw his approach, and came into the hall to meet him. She was looking very sad and pale.

"Another attack, I hear," began Mr. Snow, in his unceremonious mode of salutation. "Bothered into it, no doubt. Bexley says it came on when he was reading letters."

"Yes," answered Janet in acquiescence, her tone a resentful one. "The handwriting of the letter was George's, I saw: and nothing pleasant could come from *him*."

Mr. Snow gave a grunt as he turned towards the stairs. "Not there," interposed Janet. "He is in the breakfast-room."

With the wan white look upon his face, with the moisture of pain still upon his brow, lay Thomas Godolphin. He was on the sofa now; but he partially rose from it and assumed a sitting posture when the surgeon entered.

A few professional questions and answers, and then Mr. Snow began to grumble. "Did I not warn you that you must have perfect tranquillity?" cried he. "Rest of body and of mind?"

"You did. But how am I to get it? Even now, I ought to be at the bank, facing the trouble there?"

"Where's George?" sharply asked Mr. Snow.

"In London," replied Thomas Godolphin. But he said it in no complaining accent: neither did his tone invite further comment.

Mr. Snow was one who did not wait for an invitation in such a cause ere he spoke. "It is just one of two things, Mr. Godolphin. Either George must come back and face this worry, or else you'll die."

"I shall die however it may be, Snow," was the reply of Thomas Godolphin.

"So will most of us, I expect," returned the doctor. "But there's no necessity for our being helped on to it by others, ages before death would come of itself. What's your brother at, in London?"

"I really do not know."

"Amusing himself, of course. What's his address?"

"That I do not know."

"Who does know it? His wife?"

"I think it likely that she does now. I have not made the inquiry of her."

"Well, he must be got here."

Thomas shook his head. The action, as implying a negative, aroused the wrath of Mr. Snow. "Do you want to die?" he asked. "One would think it, by your keeping your brother away."

"There is no person who would be more glad to see my brother here than I," returned Thomas Godolphin. "If—if it were expedient that he should come."

"Need there be affected concealment between us, Mr. Godolphin?" resumed the surgeon, after a pause.

"You must be aware that I have heard the rumours afloat. A doctor hears everything, you know. You are uncertain whether it would be safe for George to come back to Prior's Ash."

"It is something of that, Snow."

“But now, what is there against him—it is of no use to mince the matter—besides those bonds of Lord Averil’s?”

“There’s nothing else against him. At least, in—in —” He did not go on. He could not bring his lips to say of his brother—“in a criminal point of view.”

“Nothing else of which unpleasant legal cognizance can be taken,” freely interposed Mr. Snow. “Well, now, it is my opinion that there’s not a shadow of fear to be entertained from Lord Averil. He is your old and firm friend, Mr. Godolphin.”

“He has been mine; yes. Not much of George’s. Most men in such a case of—of loss, would resent it, without reference to former friendship. I am not at any certainty, you see: and therefore I cannot take the responsibility of saying to my brother, ‘It is safe for you to return.’ Lord Averil has never been near me since. I argue ill from it.”

“He has not been with you for the best of all possible reasons—that he has been away from Prior’s Ash,” explained Mr. Snow.

“He has been away? I did not know it.”

“He has, then. He was called away unexpectedly by some relative’s illness, a day or two after your house was declared bankrupt. He may have refrained from calling on you just at the time of that happening, from motives of delicacy.”

“True,” replied Thomas Godolphin. But his tone was not a hopeful one. “When does he return?”

“He has returned. He came back last night.”

There was a pause. Thomas Godolphin broke it. “I wish you could give me something to avert or mitigate these sharp attacks of pain, Snow,” he said. “It is agony, in fact; not pain.”

“I know it,” replied Mr. Snow. “Where’s the use

of my attempting to give you anything? You don't take my prescription."

Thomas lifted his eyes in some surprise. "I have taken all that you have desired me."

"No, you have not. I prescribe tranquillity of mind and body. You take neither."

Thomas Godolphin leaned a little nearer to the doctor, and paused before he answered. "Tranquillity of mind, for me, has passed. I can never know it again. Were my life to be prolonged, the great healer of all things, Time, might bring it to me in a degree: but, for that, I shall not live. Snow, you must know this to be the case, under the calamity which has fallen upon my head."

"It ought to have fallen upon your brother's head, not upon yours," was the rejoinder of the surgeon, spoken crossly in his inability to contradict Mr. Godolphin's words. "At any rate, you cannot go on any longer facing this business in person."

"I must indeed. There is no help for it."

"And suppose it kills you?" was the retort.

"If I could help going, I would," said Thomas. "But there is no help. One of us must be there; and George cannot. You are not ignorant of the laws of bankruptcy."

"It is another nail in your coffin," grunted Mr. Snow, as he took his leave.

He went direct to the bank. He asked to see Mrs. George Godolphin. Maria, in her pretty morning dress of lavender-sprigged muslin, was seated with Meta on her knees. She had been reading the child a Bible story, and was now talking to her in a low voice, her own face, so gentle, so pure, and so sad, bent towards the little one, upturned to it.

“Well, young lady, and how are all the dolls?” was the surgeon’s greeting. “Will you send her away to play with them, Mrs. George?”

Meta ran on the errand. She intended to come bustling down with her arms full. Mr. Snow took his seat opposite Maria.

“Why does your husband not come back?” he abruptly asked.

The question seemed to turn Maria’s heart to sickness. She opened her lips to answer, but stopped in hesitation. Mr. Snow resumed:

“His staying away is killing Thomas Godolphin. I prescribe tranquillity for him; total rest: instead of which, he is obliged to come here day after day, and be in a continuous scene of turmoil. Your husband must return, Mrs. George Godolphin.”

“Y—es,” she faintly answered, lacking the courage to say that considerations for his personal security might forbid it.

“Murder will not mend these unhappy matters, Mrs. George Godolphin; nor would it be a desirable ending to them. And it will be nothing less than murder if he does not come back, for Mr. Godolphin will surely die.”

All Maria’s pulses seemed to beat the quicker. “Is Mr. Godolphin worse?” he asked.

“He is considerably worse. I have been called in to him this morning. My last orders to him were, not to attempt to come to the bank. His answer was, that he must come: that there was no help for it. I believe there is no help for it, George being away. You must get him home, Mrs. George.”

She looked sadly blank, sadly perplexed. Mr. Snow read it correctly. “My dear, I think there would be no hazard, Lord Averil being a personal friend of Mr.

Godolphin's. I think there's none for another reason—that if the viscount's intention had been to stir unpleasantly in the affair, he would have stirred in it ere this."

"Yes—I have thought of that," she answered.

"And now I must go again," he said, rising. "I wish to-day was twenty-four hours long, for the work I have to do in it; but I spared a few minutes to call in and tell you this. Get your husband here, for the sake of his good brother."

The tears were in Maria's eyes. She could scarcely think of Thomas Godolphin and his unmerited troubles without their rising. Mr. Snow saw the wet eyelashes, and laid his hand on the smoothly-parted hair.

"You have your share of sorrow just now, child," he said; "more than you ought to have. It is making you look like a ghost. Why does he leave you to battle it out alone?" added Mr. Snow, his anger overmastering him, as he gazed at her pale face, her rising sobs. "Prior's Ash is crying shame upon him. Are you and his brother of less account than he, in his own eyes, that he should abandon you to it?"

She strove to excuse her husband—he *was* her husband, in spite of that cruel calumny divulged by Margery—but Mr. Snow would not listen. He was in a hurry, he said, and went bustling out of the door, nearly upsetting Meta, with her dolls, who was bustling in.

Maria sent the child to the nursery again after Mr. Snow's departure, and stood, her head pressed against the frame of the open window, looking unconsciously on to the terrace, and revolving the words recently spoken. "It is killing Thomas Godolphin. It will be nothing less than murder, if George does not come back."

Every fibre of her frame was thrilling to it in answer;

every generous impulse of her heart was stirred to its depths. He *ought* to be back. She had long thought so. For her sake—but she was nothing; for Thomas Godolphin's; for her husband's own reputation. Down deep in her heart she thrust that dreadful revelation of his falsity, and strove to bury it as an English wife and gentlewoman has no resource but to do. Ay! to bury it; and to keep it buried! though the concealment eat away her life—as that scarlet letter A, you have read of, ate into the bosom of another woman renowned in story. It seemed to Maria that the time was come when she must inquire a little into the actual state of affairs, instead of hiding her head and spending her days in the indulgence of her fear and grief. If the whole world spoke against him,—if the whole world had cause to speak,—she was his wife still, and his interests and welfare were hers. Were it possible that any effort she could make would bring him back, she must make it.

The words of Mr. Snow still rang in her ears. How was she to set about it? A few minutes given to reflection, her aching brow pressed on the cold window-frame, and she turned and rang the bell. When the servant appeared, she sent him into the bank with a request that Mr. Hurde would come and speak with her for five minutes.

Mr. Hurde was not long in obeying the summons. He appeared with a pen behind his ear, and his spectacles pushed up on his brow.

It was not a pleasant task, and Maria had to swallow a good many lumps in her throat before she could make known precisely what she wanted. “Would Mr. Hurde tell her the exact state of things? What there was, or was not, against her husband?”

Mr. Hurde gave no very satisfactory reply. He took off his glasses and wiped them. Maria had invited him to a chair, and sat near him, her elbow leaning on the table, and her face slightly bent. Mr. Hurde did not know what Mrs. George Godolphin had or had not heard, or how far it would be expedient for him to speak. She guessed at his dilemma.

"Tell me all, Mr. Hurde," she said, lifting her face to his with imploring eagerness. "It is well that you should, for nothing can be more cruel than the uncertainty and suspense I am in. I know about Lord Averil's bonds."

"Ay?" he replied. But he said no more.

"I'll tell you why I ask," said Maria. "Mr. Snow has been here, and he informs me that the coming to the bank daily, the worry, is killing Mr. Godolphin. He says Mr. George ought to be back in his brother's place. I think if he can come, he ought."

"I wish he could," returned Mr. Hurde, more quickly and impressively than he usually spoke. "It is killing Mr. Godolphin—that, and the bankruptcy together. But I don't know that it would be safe for him, on account of these very bonds—Lord Averil's."

"What else is there against him?" breathed Maria.

"There's nothing else."

"Nothing else?" she echoed, a shade of hope lighting up her face and her heart.

"Nothing else. That is, nothing that he can be made criminally responsible for," added the old clerk, with marked emphasis, as if he thought that there was a great deal more, had the law but taken cognisance of it. "If Lord Averil should decline to prosecute, he might come back to-morrow. He must be back soon, whether or not, to answer to his bankruptcy; or else——"

“Or else—what?” asked Maria, falteringly, for Mr. Hurde had stopped. “Speak out.”

“Or else never come back at all; never be seen, in fact, in England. That’s how it is, ma’am.”

“Would it not be well to ascertain Lord Averil’s feelings upon the subject, Mr. Hurde?” she rejoined, breaking a silence.

“It would be very well, if it could be done. But who is to do it?”

Maria was beginning to think that she would. “You are sure there is nothing else against him?” she reiterated.

“Nothing, ma’am, that need prevent his returning to Prior’s Ash.”

There was no more to be answered, and Mr. Hurde withdrew. Maria lost herself in thought. Could she dare to go to Lord Averil and beseech his clemency? Her brow flushed at the thought. But she had been inured to humiliation of late, and it would be but another drop in the cup of pain. Oh, the relief it would be, could the dreadful suspense, the uncertainty, end! The suspense was awful. Even if it ended in the worst, it would be almost a relief. If Lord Averil should be intending to prosecute, who knew but he might forego the intention at her prayers? If so—if so—why, she should ever say that God had sent her to him.

There was the reverse side of the picture. A haughty reception of her—for was she not the wife of the man who had wronged him?—and a cold refusal. How she should bear that she did not like to think. Should she go? Could she go? Even now her heart was failing her—

What noise was that? A sort of commotion in the hall. She opened the dining-room door and glanced

out. Thomas Godolphin had come, and was entering the bank, leaning on his servant Bexley's arm, there to go through his day's work, looking more fit to be in his coffin. It was the turning of the scale.

"I *will* go to him!" murmured Maria to herself. "I will go to Lord Averil and hear all there may be to hear. Let me do it! Let me do it!—for the sake of Thomas Godolphin!"

CHAPTER V

A VISIT OF PAIN.

THE proposed application of Maria Godolphin to Lord Averil may appear but a very slight affair to the careless and thoughtless; one of those trifling annoyances which must occasionally beset our course through life. Why should Maria have shrunk from it with that shiveringly sensitive dread?—and have set about it as a forced duty, with a burning cheek and failing heart? Consider what it was that she undertook, you who would regard it lightly; pause an instant and look at it in all its bearings. Her husband, George Godolphin, had robbed Lord Averil of sixteen thousand pounds; or their value. It is of no use to mince the matter. He had shown himself neither more nor less than a common robber, a thief, a swindler. He, a man of the same social stamp as Lord Averil, moving in the same sphere of county society, had fallen from his pedestal by his own fraudulent act, down to a level (in crime) with the very dregs of mankind. Perhaps no one in the whole world could ever feel it in the same humiliating degree as did his wife—unless it might be Thomas Godolphin. Both of them, unfortunately for them—yes, I say it advisedly—unfortunately for them in this bitter storm of shame—

both of them were of that honourable, upright, ultra-refined nature, on which such a blow falls far more cruelly than death. Death! death! If it does come, it brings at least one recompense: the humiliation and the trouble, the bitter pain and the carking care are escaped from, left behind for ever in the cruel world. Oh! if these miserable ill-doers could but bear in their own person all the pain and shame!—if George Godolphin could but have stood out on a pinnacle in the face of Prior's Ash and expiated all his folly alone! But it could not be. It never can or shall be. As the sins of the people in the Israelitish camp were laid upon the innocent and unhappy scape-goat, so the sins which men commit in the present day are heaped upon unconscious and guileless heads. As the poor scape-goat wandered away with his hidden burden into the remote wilderness, away from the haunts of man, so do these other heavily-laden ones stagger away with their unseen load, only striving to hide themselves from the eyes of men—anywhere—in patience and silence—praying to die.

Every humiliation which George Godolphin had brought upon himself,—every harsh word cast on him by the world,—every innate sense of guilt and shame which must accompany such conduct, was being expiated by his wife. Yes, it fell worst upon her: Thomas was but his brother; she was part and parcel of himself. But that God's ways are not as our ways, we might feel tempted to ask why it should be that these terrible trials are so often brought upon the head of such women as Maria Godolphin—timid, good, gentle, sensitive—the least of all able to bear them. That such is frequently the case, is indisputable. In no way was Maria fitted to cope with this. Many mig't have felt

less this very expedition to Lord Averil: to her it was as the very bitterest humiliation. She had hitherto met Lord Averil as an equal—she had entertained him at her house as such—she had stood before him always in her calm self-possession, with a clear face and a clear conscience; and now she must go to him a humble petitioner—bow before him in all her self-conscious disgrace—implore him to save her husband from the consequences of his criminal act; the standing at the felon's bar, and its sequel—the working at the hulks. She must virtually ask Lord Averil to put up quietly with the loss of the sixteen thousand pounds, and to make no sign.

With a cheek flushed with emotion,—with a heart sick unto faintness,—Maria Godolphin stepped out of her house in the full blaze of the mid-day sun. A gloomy day, showing herself less conspicuously to the curious gazers of Prior's Ash, had been more welcome to her. She had gone out so rarely since the crash came—but that once, in fact, when she went to see her mother—that her appearance was the signal for a commotion. "There's Mrs. George Godolphin! There's Mrs. George Godolphin!" and Prior's Ash flocked to its doors and its windows as if Mrs. George Godolphin had been some unknown curiosity in the animal world, never yet exhibited to the eyes of the public. Maria shielded her burning face from observation as well as she could with her small parasol, and passed on.

Lord Averil, she had found, was staying with Colonel Max, and her way led her past the rectory of All Souls', past the house of Lady Sarah Grame. Lady Sarah was at the window, and Maria bowed. The bow was not returned. It was not returned! Lady Sarah turned away with a haughty movement, a cold glance. It told

cruelly upon Maria : had anything been wanted to prove to her the estimation in which she was now held by Prior's Ash, that would have done it.

The distance from her own house to that of Colonel Max was about two miles. Rather a long walk for Maria at the present time, for she was not in a condition of health to endure fatigue. It was a square, moderate-sized, red-brick house, standing considerably back from the high road ; and as Maria turned into its avenue of approach, what with the walk, and what with the dread apprehension of the coming interview, the sick faintness at her heart had begun to show itself upon her face. The insult offered her (could it be called anything less?) by Lady Sarah Grame, had somehow seemed an earnest of what she might expect from Lord Averil. Lady Sarah had not a tenth of the grievance against the bank that the viscount had.

Nobody ever approached the colonel's house without having their ears saluted with the baying and snarling of his fox-hounds, whose kennels were close by. In happier days—days so recently past, that they might almost be counted as present—when Maria had gone to that house to dinner-parties, she had drawn closer to George in the carriage, and whispered how much she should dislike it if *he* kept a pack of fox-hounds near their dwelling-place. Never, never should she drive to that house in state again, her husband by her side. Oh ! the contrast it presented—that time and this ! Now she was approaching it like the criminal that the world thought her, hiding her face with her veil ; hiding herself, so far as she might, from observation.

She reached the door, and paused ere she rang : her pulses were throbbing wildly, her heart beat as if it would burst its bounds. The nearer that the interview

drew, the more formidable did it appear, the less able herself to face it. The temptation came over her—to go back. It assailed her very strongly, and she might have yielded to it, but for the thought of Thomas Godolphin.

She rang at the bell: a timid ring. One of those rings that seem to announce the self-humble applicant—and who was the wife of George Godolphin now, that she should proclaim herself with pomp and clatter? A man settling himself into his green livery coat opened the door.

“Is Lord Averil within?”

“No.”

The servant was a stranger, and did not know her. He may have thought it curious that a lady, who spoke in a low tone and scarcely raised her eyes through her veil, should come there alone to inquire after Lord Averil. He resumed, rather pertly:

“His lordship walked out an hour ago with the colonel. It’s quite unbeknown what time they may come in.”

In her shrinking dread of the interview, it almost seemed a relief. Strange to say, so fully absorbed had she been in the anticipated pain, that the contingency of his being out had not crossed her mind. The man stood with the door in his hand, half open, half closed: had he invited her to walk in and sit down, she might have done so, for the sake of the rest. But he did not.

Retracing her steps down the path, she branched off into a dark walk, overshadowed by trees, just within the entrance-gate, and sat down upon a bench. Now the reaction was coming; the disappointment: all that mental agony, all that weary way of fatigue, and not

to see him! It must all be gone over again on the morrow.

She threw her hot veil back; she pressed her throbbing forehead against the thick trunk of the old oak-tree: and in that same moment some one entered the gate on his way to the house, saw her, and turned short round to approach her. It was Lord Averil.

Was the moment really come? Every drop of blood in her body seemed to rush to her heart and send it on with a tumultuous bound,—every sense of the mind seemed to leave her,—every fear that the imagination can conjure up seemed to rise up in menace. She rose to her feet and gazed at him, her sight partially leaving her, her face changing to a ghastly whiteness.

But when he hastened forward and caught her hands in the deepest respect and sympathy; when he bent over her, saying some confused words—confused to *her* ear—of surprise at seeing her, of pity for her apparent illness; when he addressed her with every token of the old kindness, the consideration of bygone days, then the revulsion of feeling overcame her, and Maria burst into a flood of distressing tears, and sobbed passionately.

“I am fatigued with the walk,” she said, with a lame attempt at apology when her emotion was subsiding. “I came over to speak to you, Lord Averil. I—I—have something to ask you.”

“But you should not have walked,” he answered, in a kind tone of remonstrance. “Why did you not drop me a note? I would have come to you.”

She felt as one about to faint. She had taken off her gloves, and her small white hands were unconsciously writhing themselves together in her lap, showing how great was her inward pain; her trembling lips, pale

with agitation, refused to bring out their words connectedly.

“I want to ask you to be merciful to my husband. Not to prosecute.”

The gasping words were breathed in a whisper ; the rushing tide of shame changed her face to crimson. Lord Averil did not for the moment answer, and the delay, the fear of non-success, imparted to her somewhat of courage.

“For Thomas’s sake,” she said. “I ask it for Thomas’s sake.”

“My dear Mrs. Godolphin,” he was beginning, but she interrupted him, her tone changing to one of desperate energy.

“Oh, be merciful, be merciful ! Be merciful to my husband, Lord Averil, for his brother’s sake. Nay—for George’s own sake ; for my sake, for my poor child’s sake, Meta’s. He can never come back to Prior’s Ash, unless you will be merciful to him ; he cannot come now, and Thomas has to go through all the worry and the misery, and it is killing him. Mr. Snow came to me this morning and said it was killing him ; he said that George must come back if he would save his brother’s life : and I spoke to Mr. Hurde, and he said there was nothing to prevent his coming back, except the danger from Lord Averil. And then I made my mind up to come to you.”

“I shall not prosecute him, Mrs. George Godolphin. My long friendship with his brother debars it. He may come back to-morrow, in perfect assurance that he has nothing to fear from me.”

“It is true?—I may rely upon you?” she gasped.

“Indeed you may. I have never had a thought of prosecuting. I cannot describe to you the pain that it

has been productive of to me : I mean the affair altogether, not my particular loss : but that pain would be greatly increased were I to bring myself to prosecute one bearing the name of Godolphin. I am sorry for George ; deeply sorry for him. Report says that he has allowed himself to fall into bad hands, and could not extricate himself."

The worst was over ; the best known : and Maria leaned against the friendly trunk and untied her bonnet-strings, and wiped the moisture from her now pallid face. Exhaustion was supervening. Lord Averil rose and held out his arm to her.

"Let me take you to the house and give you a glass of sherry."

"I could not take it, thank you. I would rather not go to the house."

"Colonel Max will be very glad to see you. I have but just parted with him. He went round by the stables."

She shook her head. "I do not like to see any one now."

The subdued words, the saddened tone seemed to speak volumes. Lord Averil glanced down at her compassionately. "This has been a grievous trial to you, Mrs. Godolphin."

"Yes," she answered, very quietly. Had she spoken but a word of what it had really been to her, emotion might again have broken forth.

"But you must not let it affect you too greatly," he remonstrated. "As I fear it is doing."

"I can't help it," she whispered. "I knew nothing of it, and it came upon me like a clap of thunder. I never had so much as a suspicion that anything was going wrong : had people asked me what bank was the

most stable throughout the kingdom, I should have said ours. I never suspected evil: and yet the blame is being cast to me. Lord Averil, I—I—did not know about those bonds.”

“No, no,” he warmly answered. “You need not tell me that. I wish you could allow the trouble to pass over you more lightly.”

The trouble! She clasped her hands to pain. “Don’t speak of it,” she wailed. “At times it seems more than I can bear. But for Meta, I should be glad to die.”

What was Lord Averil to answer? He could only give her the earnest sympathy of his whole heart. “A man who can bring deliberately this misery upon the wife of his bosom deserves hanging,” was his bitter thought.

“What are you going to do?” he asked. “Surely not to attempt to walk back?”

“I shall take my time over it,” she answered. “It is not much of a walk.”

“Too much for you at present,” he gravely said. “Let me send you home in one of Colonel Max’s carriages.”

“No, oh no!” she quickly answered. “Indeed I have not miscalculated my strength: I can walk perfectly well, and would prefer to do so.”

“Then you will come into the house and take a rest first.”

“I had rather not. Let me sit here a little longer: it is resting me.”

“I will be back immediately,” he said, walking from her very quickly, and plunging into a narrow path which was a short cut to the house. When he reappeared he bore a glass of wine and biscuit on a plate.

She drank the wine. The biscuit she put back with a shiver. "I never can eat anything now," she said, lifting her eyes to his to beseech his pardon.

When she at length rose, Lord Averil took her hand and laid it within his arm. She supposed he meant to escort her to the gate.

"I have not said a word of thanks to you," she murmured, when they reached it. "I am very, very grateful to you, very sensible of your kindness; but I cannot speak of it. My heart seems broken."

She had halted and held out her hand in farewell. Lord Averil did not release her, but walked on. "If you will walk home, Mrs. George Godolphin, you must at least allow my arm to help you."

"I could not; indeed I could not," she said, stopping resolutely, though the tears were dropping from her eyes. "I must go back alone; I would rather."

Lord Averil yielded partially. The first part of the road was lonely, and he must see her so far. "I should have called on Thomas Godolphin before this, but I have been away," he remarked, as they went on. "I will go and see him—perhaps this afternoon."

"He will be so thankful to hear of this! It will be like a renewed lease of life. They have been fearful at Ashlydyat."

An exceedingly vexed expression crossed Lord Averil's lips. "I thought they had known me better at Ashlydyat," he said. "Thomas, at any rate. Feared *me!*"

At length Maria would not allow him to go farther, and Lord Averil clasped her hand in both of his. "Promise me to try and keep up your spirits," he said. "You should do so for your husband's sake."

"Yes; as well as I can," she replied, in a broken tone. "Thank you! thank you ever, Lord Averil!"

She called in at the Rectory as she passed it, and sat for a while with her father and mother; but it was pain to her to do so. The bitter wrong inflicted upon them by her husband was making itself heard in her heart in loud reproaches. The bitter wrong of another kind dealt out to herself by him, was all too present then. They knew how she had idolized him; they must have known how blindly misplaced that idolatry was; and the red flush mounted to Maria's brow at the thought.

Oh, if she could but redeem the past, so far as they were concerned! It seemed that that would be enough. If she could but restore peace and comfort to their home, refund to her father what he had lost, how thankful she should be! She would move heaven and earth if that might accomplish it,—she would spend her own days in the workhouse,—pass them by a roadside hedge, and think nothing of it—if by those means she could remove the wrong done. She lifted her eyes to the blue sky, almost asking that a miracle might be wrought, to repair the injury which had been dealt out to her father. Ah me! if Heaven repaired all the injuries inflicted by man upon man, it would surely have no time for other works of mercy!

CHAPTER VI.

A SHOW IN THE STREETS OF PRIOR'S ASH.

BARELY had Maria departed and closed the Rectory-gate behind her, when she encountered a stylish vehicle as high as a mountain, dashing along at an alarming pace, with a couple of frantic dogs behind it. It was that "turn-out" you have heard of, belonging to Mrs. Charlotte Pain. Mrs. Charlotte Pain was in it, resplendent as the sun, dazzling the admiring eyes of Prior's Ash in a gown of pink moiré antique, and a head-gear which appeared to be composed of pink and white feathers and a glittering silver aigrette, its form altogether not unlike a French gendarme's hat, if you have the pleasure of being familiar with that awe-imparting article. At the sight of Maria she pulled the horses up with a jerk: upon which ensued some skirmishing and scattering abroad of dust, the animals, both horses and dogs, not approving of so summary a check; but Charlotte was resolute, and her whip effective. She then flung the reins to the groom who sat beside her, jumped out, and held her hand to Maria.

Maria accepted it. The revelation gratuitously bestowed on her by Margery was beating its words upon her memory; and her brow, face, and neck had flushed to a glowing crimson. Some might have flung the

offered hand aside, and picked up their skirts with a jerk, and sailed away with an air: but Maria was a gentlewoman.

“How well you look!” exclaimed Charlotte, regarding her in some surprise. “Perhaps you are warm? I say, Mrs. George”—dropping her voice to a whisper—“whither do you think I am bound?”

“I cannot tell.”

“To see Lord Averil. He is back again, and stopping at old Max’s. I am going to badger him out of a promise not to hurt George Godolphin—about those rubbishing bonds, you know. I won’t leave him until I get it.”

“Yes,” said Maria.

“I will have it. Or—war to the knife, my lord! I should like to see him, or anybody else, attempt to refuse *me* anything I stood out for,” she added, with a triumphantly saucy glance, meant for the absent viscount. “Poor George has nobody here to fight his battles for him, and he can’t return to enter on them in person; so it’s well that some friend should do it. They are saying in the town this morning, that Averil has returned for the purpose of prosecuting: I mean to cut his prosecuting claws off.”

“It is a mistake,” said Maria. “Lord Averil has no intention of prosecuting.”

“How do you know?” bluntly asked Charlotte.

“I have just seen him.”

“You don’t mean to say you have been over to old Max’s?” exclaimed Charlotte, opening her brilliant black eyes very wide.

“Yes, I have.”

“You quiet slyboots! You have never walked there and back?”

"I don't feel very tired. I have been resting with mamma for half an hour."

"And he's safe—Averil?" eagerly continued Charlotte.

"Quite safe. Remember his long friendship with Thomas Godolphin."

"Oh, my dear, men forget friendship when their pockets are in question," was the light remark of Charlotte. "You are *sure*, though, Averil's not deceiving you? I don't much think he is one to do a dirty trick of that sort, but I have lived long enough to learn that you must prove a man before you trust him."

"Lord Averil is not deceiving me," quietly answered Maria. "He has given me a message for my husband."

"Then there's no necessity for my going to him," said Charlotte. "Let me drive you home, Mrs. George Godolphin. I am sure you are fatigued. I never saw any one change countenance as you do. A few minutes ago you looked vulgarly hot, and now you are pale enough for the grave. Step in. James, you must change to the back seat."

Step into that formidably high thing, and sit by Mrs. Charlotte Pain's side, and dash through Prior's Ash! Maria wondered whether the gossips of Prior's Ash—who, as it seemed, had made so free with gay George's name—or Margery, would stare the most. She declined the invitation.

"You are afraid," cried Charlotte. "Well, it's a great misfortune, these timid temperaments; but I suppose they can't be cured. Kate Verrall's another coward: but she's not so bad as you. Toss me my parasol, James."

James handed his mistress a charming toy of pink moiré antique silk and point-lacc, mounted on a handle

of carved ivory. Charlotte put it up before her face, and turned to accompany Maria.

Maria put her parasol up before *her* face, thankful that it might serve to shield it, if only partially, from the curious eyes of Prior's Ash. Remembering the compliments that Prior's Ash had been kind enough to pass on her "blind simplicity," she would not exactly have chosen her present companion to walk through the streets with. Dame Bond, with her unsteady steps and her snuffy black gown, would have been preferable of the two.

"But," thought Maria in her generosity, striving to thrust that other unpleasant feeling down deep in her heart, to lose sight of it, "it is really kind of Mrs. Pain to be seen thus publicly with me. Other ladies would be ashamed of me now, I suppose."

They stepped on. Maria with her parasol so close to her face that there was a danger of her running against people; Charlotte turning herself from side to side, flirting the costly little pink toy as one flirts a fan, bowing and scraping to all she met. The dogs snarled and barked behind; the carriage pranced and curveted by their side; the unhappy James having his hands full with the horses, which took a high standing, and refused to recognize any controlling mastership save that of Mrs. Charlotte Pain. Altogether, it was a more conspicuous progress than Maria would have chosen: but we are let in for greatness sometimes, you know, against our will. Thus they arrived at the bank, and Maria held out her hand to Charlotte. She *could* not be otherwise than courteous, no matter to whom.

"I am coming in," said Charlotte, bluntly. "Take care what you are about with the horses, James."

Maria led the way to the dining-room. All was as it

used to be in that charming room; furniture, pictures, elegant trifles for show or for use; all was the same: save—that those things belonged not now to Maria and her husband, but were noted down as the property of others. Soon, soon to be put up for sale! Charlotte's rich moiré antique came to an anchor on a sofa, and she untied the string of the gendarme hat, and pushed it back on her head.

“I am going to leave Prior's Ash.”

“To leave Prior's Ash!” repeated Maria. “When?”

“Within a week of this. Lady Godolphin's coming back to the Folly.”

“But—Lady Godolphin cannot come back to it without giving you due notice to quit?” debated Maria.

“It's all arranged,” said Charlotte, opening her mouth with a loud yawn. “Lady Godolphin wrote to Verrall, and the arrangements have been agreed upon amicably. Lady Godolphin foregoes a certain portion of rent, and we go out immediately. I am very glad, do you know. I had made my mind up not to stay. As to the Verralls, it may be said that they virtually took leave of the Folly long ago. Uncommonly glad I shall be to leave it,” repeated Charlotte, with emphasis.

“Why?”

“Who'd care to stay at Prior's Ash, after all this bother? You and George will be leaving it for London, you know—and I hope it won't be long first. You must make me useful up there, Mrs. George. I'll——”

“Who told you we were going to leave for London?” interrupted Maria, in astonishment.

“Nobody told me. But of course you will. Do you suppose George Godolphin will care to stop amongst this set? Not he. He'd see Prior's Ash go promenading first. What tie has he here, now Ashlydyat's

gone? Verrall talks of buying a hunting-box in Leicestershire."

"Does he?" replied Maria, mechanically, her thoughts buried elsewhere.

"Buying or hiring one. *I* should hire; and then there's no bother if you want to make a flitting. But Verrall is one who takes nobody's counsel but his own. What a worry it will be!" added Charlotte, after a pause.

Maria raised her eyes. She did not understand the remark.

"The packing up of the things at the Folly," explained Charlotte. "We begin to-morrow morning. I must be at the head of it, for it's of no use trusting that sort of work entirely to servants. *Bon jour, petite coquette! Et les poupées?*"

The diversion was caused by the flying entrance of Miss Meta. The young lady was not yet particularly well up in the Gallic language, and only half understood. She went straight up to Mrs. Pain, threw her soft, sweet eyes right into that lady's flashing black ones, rested her pretty arms upon the *moiré antique*, and spoke out with her accustomed boldness.

"Where are the dogs now?"

"Chained down in the pit-hole," responded Mrs. Pain.

"Margery says there is no pit-hole, and the dogs were not chained down," asserted Meta.

"Margery's nothing but an old woman. Don't you believe her. If she tells stories again we'll chain her down with the dogs."

"Two of the dogs are outside," said Meta.

"Not the same dogs, child," returned Mrs. Pain, with cool equanimity. "They are street dogs, those are."

"They are with the carriage," persisted Meta. "They are barking round it."

"Are they barking? They can see Margery's face at the nursery window, and are frightened at it. Dogs always bark at ugly old women's faces. You tell Margery so."

"Margery's not ugly."

"You innocent little simpleton! She's ugly enough to frighten the crows."

How long the colloquy might have continued it is hard to say: certainly Meta would not be the one to give in: but it was interrupted by Margery herself. A note had just been delivered at the house for Mrs. George Godolphin, and Margery, who probably was glad of the excuse for entering, brought it in. She never looked at all towards Mrs. Pain; she came straight up to her mistress, apparently ignoring Charlotte's presence, but you should have seen the expression of her face. The coronet on the seal of the letter imparted a suspicion to Maria that it came from Lord Averil, and her heart sunk within her. Could he be withdrawing his promise of clemency?

"Who brought this?" she asked, in a subdued tone.

"A servant on horseback, ma'am."

Charlotte had started up, catching at her feathers, for Pierce was at the dining-room door now, saying that the horses were alarmingly restive. "Good-afternoon, Mrs. George Godolphin," she called out, unceremoniously, as she hastened away. "I'll come and spend a quiet hour with you before I leave for town. Adieu, petite diablesse! I'd have you up to-morrow for a farewell visit, but that I'm afraid you might get nailed down with the furniture in some of the packing-cases."

Away she went. Meta was hastening after her, but

was caught up by Margery with a gasp and a sob—as if she had been saving her from some imminent danger. Maria opened the letter with trembling fingers.

“MY DEAR MRS. GODOLPHIN,

“It has occurred to me since I parted from you, that you may wish to have the subject of our conversation confirmed in writing. I hereby assure you that I shall take no legal proceedings whatever against your husband on account of my lost bonds, and you may tell him from me that he need not, on that score, remain away from Prior’s Ash.

“I hope you have reached home without too much fatigue.

“Believe me, ever sincerely yours,

“AVERIL.”

“How kind he is!” burst involuntarily from Maria’s lips.

The words were drowned in a noise outside. Charlotte had contrived to ascend to her seat in spite of the dancing horses. She stood up in the high carriage, as George Godolphin had once done at that same door, and by dint of strength and skill she subdued them to control. Turning their fiery heads, scattering the assembled multitude right and left, nodding pleasantly to the applause vouchsafed her, Mrs. Charlotte Pain and the turn-out disappeared with a clatter, amidst the rolling of wheels, the barking of dogs, and the intense admiration of the gaping populace.

CHAPTER VII.

UNAVAILING REGRETS.

MISS GODOLPHIN sat at one of the windows facing the west in their home at Ashlydyat. Soon to be their home no more. Her cheek rested pensively on her fingers, as she thought—oh, with what bitterness!—of the grievous past. She had been universally ridiculed for paying heed to the superstitious traditions attaching to the house, and yet how strangely they appeared to be working themselves out. It had begun—Janet seemed to think the ruin had begun—with the departure of her father, Sir George, from Ashlydyat: and the tradition went that when the head of the Godolphins should voluntarily abandon Ashlydyat, the ruin would follow.

Had Sir George's departure brought on the ruin—been the first end of the thread that led to it? Janet was debating the question in her mind. That she was prone to indulge in superstitious fancies to a degree many would pronounce ridiculously absurd, cannot be denied: but in striving to solve that particular problem she was relinquishing the by-paths of the supernatural for the broad road of common sense. From the facts that were being brought to light by the bankruptcy, turning themselves up by degrees one after another, it was easy to see that

George Godolphin had been seduced into a hornet's nest, and so been eased of his money. Whether the process had been summary or slow—whether he had walked into it head-foremost in blind simplicity—or whether he had only succumbed to it under the most refined Machiavellian craft, brought subtly to bear upon him, was of no consequence to inquire. It is of no consequence to us. He had fallen into the hands of a company of swindlers, who ensnared their victims and transacted their business under the semblance of bill-discounting: and they had brought George to what he was.

Head and chief of this apparently reputable firm was Verrall: and Verrall, there was not a doubt, had been the chief agent in George Godolphin's undoing. But for Sir George Godolphin's quitting Ashlydyat and putting it up in the market to let, Verrall might never have come near Prior's Ash; never have met Mr. George Godolphin. In that case the chances were that Mr. George would have been a flourishing banker yet. Gay he would have been; needlessly extravagant; scattering his wild oats by the bushel—but not a man come to ruin and to beggary.

Janet Godolphin was right: it *was* the quitting of Ashlydyat by her father, and the consequent tenancy of Mr. Verrall, which had been the first link in the chain, terminating in George's disgrace, in their ruin.

She sat there, losing herself in regret after regret. "If my father had not left it!—if he had never married Mrs. Campbell!—if my own dear mother had not died!"—she lost herself, I say, in these regrets, bitter as they were vain.

How many of these useless regrets might embitter the lives of us all! How many do embitter them! If

I had but done so-and-so!—if I had but taken the left turning when I took the right!—if I had but known what that man was from the first, and shunned his acquaintance!—if I had but chosen that path in life instead of this one!—if I had, in short, but done the precisely opposite to what I did do! Vain, vain repinings!—vain, useless, profitless repinings! The only plan is to keep them as far as possible from our hearts. If we could foresee the end of a thing at its beginning,—if we could buy a stock of experience at the onset of life,—if we could, in point of fact, become endowed with the light of Divine wisdom, what different men and women the world would see!

But we cannot. We cannot undo the past. It is ours with all its folly, its short-sightedness, perhaps its guilt. Though we stretch out our yearning and pitiful hands to Heaven in their movement of agony—though we wail aloud our bitter cry, Lord, pardon me—heal me—help me!—though we beat on our remorseful bosom and tear away its flesh piecemeal in bitter repentance, we cannot undo the past. We cannot undo it. The past remains to us unaltered; and must remain so for ever.

Perhaps some idea of this kind, of the utter uselessness of these regrets—but no personal remorse attached to *her*—was making itself heard in the mind of Miss Godolphin, even through her grief. She had clasped her hands upon her bosom now, and bent her head downwards, completely lost in retrospect. One drop in the Godolphins' full cup of pain had been removed from it that day—the knowledge that Viscount Averil did not intend to institute criminal proceedings against George. When Thomas had returned home to dinner, he brought the news.

“Did you say Maria walked over to Colonel Max’s?” Janet suddenly lifted her eyes to ask.

It was to Thomas that she spoke. He sat opposite to her at the other corner of the window. He, too, appeared to be buried in thought.

“Walked? Yes, she walked.”

“Imprudent!” was the short remark returned by Janet.

“She said it had not tired her. I think,” continued Thomas, “there are times when the mind is all-predominant; when its emotions, whether of sorrow or of joy, are so intense that all bodily consciousness is lost, and fatigue is not felt. It was no doubt so to-day with Maria.”

Janet said no more. She rose presently to leave the room, and almost immediately afterwards Bexley appeared, showing in Lord Averil.

He hastened forward to prevent Thomas Godolphin’s rising. Laying one hand upon his shoulder and the other on his hands, he pressed him down and would not let him rise.

“How am I to thank you?” were the first words spoken by Thomas—in reference to the clemency shown to his brother.

“Hush!” said Lord Averil. “My dear friend, you are allowing these things to affect you more than they ought. I see the greatest change in you, even in this short time.”

The slanting rays of the declining sun were falling on the face of Thomas Godolphin, lighting up its fading vitality. The cheeks were thinner, the weak hair seemed scantier, the truthful gray eyes had acquired an habitual expression of pain. Lord Averil leaned over him and noted it all.

“Sit down,” said Thomas, drawing the chair which had been occupied by Janet nearer to him.

Lord Averil accepted the invitation, but did not release the hand. “I understand you have been doubting me,” he said. “You might have known me better. We have been friends a long while.”

Thomas Godolphin only answered by a pressure of the hand he held. Old and familiar friends though they were, understanding each other’s hearts almost, as these close friends should do, it was yet a most painful point to Thomas Godolphin. On the one side there was his brother’s crime; on the other there was the loss of that large sum to Lord Averil. Thomas had to do battle with pain perpetually now: but there were moments when the conflict was nearer and sharper than at others. This was one.

They subsided into conversation: its theme, as was natural, the bankruptcy and its attendant details. Lord Averil found that Thomas was casting blame on himself.

“Why should you?” he asked, impulsively. “Is it not enough that the world should do so, without yourself endorsing it?”

A faint smile crossed Thomas Godolphin’s face at the thoughtless admission spoken so openly: but he knew, none better, how great a share of blame was dealt out to him. “It is due,” he observed to Lord Averil. “I ought not to have reposed trust so implicit in George. Things could not have come to this pass if I had not.”

“If we cannot place implicit trust in a brother, in whom can we place it?”

“True. But, in my position as the trustee of others, I ought not to have *trusted* that things were going on right. I ought to have *known* that they were.”

They went on to the future. Thomas spoke of the

selling up of all things, of their turning out of Ashlydyat. "Is that decree irrevocable?" Lord Averil interrupted. "Must Ashlydyat be sold?"

Thomas was surprised at the question. It was so superfluous a one. "It will be sold very shortly," he said, "to the highest bidder. Any stranger who bids most will get Ashlydyat. I hope," he added, with a half start, as if the possibility occurred to him then for the first time, "that the man Verrall will not become a bidder for it—and get it! Lady Godolphin turns him out from the Folly."

"Never fear," said Lord Averil. "He'll be only too glad to relieve Prior's Ash of his presence. Thomas, can nothing be done to the man? Your brother may have been a willing tool in his hands, but broad whispers are going about that it is Verrall who has reaped the harvest. Can no legal cognizance be taken of it?"

Thomas shook his head. "We may suspect a great deal—in fact, it is more than suspicion—but we can prove nothing. The man will rise up triumphant from it all, and carry his head higher than ever. I hope, I say, that he will not think of Ashlydyat. They were in it once, you know."

"Why could not Ashlydyat be disposed of by private contract?—by valuation? It might be, if the assignees chose."

"Yes, I suppose it might be."

"I wish you would sell it to me," breathed Lord Averil.

"To you!" repeated Thomas Godolphin. "Ay, indeed. Were you to have Ashlydyat I should the less keenly regret its passing from the Godolphins."

Lord Averil paused. He appeared to want to say something, but to hesitate in doubt.

“Would it please you that one of the Godolphins should still inhabit it?” he asked at length.

“I do not understand you,” replied Thomas. “There is no chance—I had almost said possibility—of a Godolphin henceforward inhabiting Ashlydyat.”

“I hope and trust there is,” said Lord Averil, with emotion. “If Ashlydyat is ever to be mine, I shall not care for it unless a Godolphin shares it with me. I speak of your sister Cecilia.”

Thomas sat in calmness, waiting for more. Nothing could stir him greatly now. Lord Averil gave him the outline of the past. Of his love for Cecilia, and her rejection of him.

“There has been something,” he continued, “in her manner of late, which has renewed hope within me—otherwise I should not be saying this to you now. Quite of late; since her rejection of me; I have observed what—what—I cannot describe it, Thomas,” he broke off. “But I have determined to risk my fate once more. And you—you—loving Cecil as I do—you thought I could prosecute George!”

“But I did not know that you loved Cecil.”

“I suppose not. It has seemed to me, though, that my love must have been patent to the world. You would give her to me, would you not?”

“Ay; thankfully,” was the warm answer. “The thought of leaving Cecil unprotected has been one of my cares. Janet and Bessy are older and more experienced. Let me give you one consolation, Averil: that if Cecil has rejected you, she has rejected others. Janet has fancied she had some secret attachment. Can it have been to yourself?”

“If so, why should she have rejected me?”

“In truth I do not know. Cecil has seemed

grievously unhappy since these troubles arose: 'almost like one who has no further hope in life. George's peril has told upon her.'

"His peril?"

"From you."

Lord Averil bit his lip. "Cecil, above all others—unless it were yourself—might have known that he was safe."

A silence ensued. Lord Averil resumed: "There is one upon whom I fear these troubles are telling all too greatly, Thomas. And that is your brother's wife."

"May God comfort her!" was the involuntary answer that broke from the lips of Thomas Godolphin.

"Had I been ever so harshly inclined, I think the sight of her to-day would have disarmed me. No, no: had I never owned a friendship for you; had I never loved Cecil, there is certainly enough of evil, of cruel, unavoidable evil, which must fall with this calamity, without my adding to it."

"When I brought word home this afternoon that you were well disposed towards George—that he had nothing to fear from you, Cecil burst into tears."

A glow arose to Lord Averil's face. He looked out on the setting sun in silence. "Is your brother sent for?" he presently asked.

"Maria and I have both written for him now. I should think he will come. What is it, Bexley?"

"A message is come from Mrs. Pain, sir, about some of the fixtures at Lady Godolphin's Folly. Mrs. Pain wants to know if you have a list of them. She forgets which belong to the house, and which don't."

Thomas Godolphin said a word of apology to Lord Averil, and left the room. In the hall he met Cecil

crossing to it. She went in, quite unconscious who was its inmate. He rose up to welcome her.

A momentary hesitation in her steps; a doubt whether she should not run away again, and then she recalled her senses and went forward.

She recalled what he had done that day for her brother; she went forward to thank him. But ere the thanks had well begun, they came to a summary end, for Cecil had burst into tears.

How it went on, and what was exactly said or done, neither of them could remember afterwards. A very few minutes, and Cecil's head was resting upon his shoulder, all the mistakes of the past cleared up between them.

She might not have confessed to him how long she had loved—all since that long past time when they were together at Mrs. Averil's—but for her dread lest he might fear that she was only accepting him now out of gratitude—gratitude for his noble behaviour to her erring brother. And so she told the truth: that she had loved him and only him all along.

“Cecil, my darling, what a long misery might have been spared me had I known this!”

Cecil looked down. Perhaps some might also have been spared to her. “It is not right that you should marry me now,” she said.

“Why?”

“On account of this dreadful disgrace. George must have forgotten how it would fall upon——”

“Hush, Cecil! The disgrace, as I look upon it—as I believe all just people must look upon it—is confined to himself. It is indeed. Not an iota of the respect due to Thomas by the world, of the consideration due

to the Miss Godolphins, will be abated. Rely upon it I am right."

"But Thomas is being reflected upon daily; personally abused."

"By a few inconsiderate creditors, smarting just now under their loss. That will all pass away. If you could read my heart and see how happy you have made me, you would know how little cause you have to talk of the 'disgrace,' Cecil."

She was happy also, as she rested there against him; too happy.

"Would you like to live at Ashlydyat, Cecil? Thomas would rather we had it than that it should lapse to strangers. I should wish to buy it."

"Oh yes—if it could be."

"I dare say it can. Of course it can. Ashlydyat must be sold, and I shall be as welcome a purchaser as any other would be. If it must be put up to auction, I can be the highest bidder, but I dare say they will be glad to save the expense of an auction, and let me purchase it by private contract. I might purchase the furniture also, Cecil; all the old relics that Sir George set so much store by—that Janet does still."

"If it could be!" she murmured.

"Indeed I think it may be. They will be glad to set a price upon it as it stands: look at the cost it will save. And, Cecil, we will drive away all the ghostly superstitions, and that ominous Shadow——"

Cecil lifted her face, an eager light upon it. "Janet says that the curse has been worked out with the ruin of the Godolphins: she thinks that the dark Shadow will never come any more."

"So much the better. We will have the Dark Plain dug up and made into a children's playground, and a

summer-house for them shall be erected on the very spot which the Shadow has made its own. There may be children here some time, Cecil."

Cecil's eyelashes were bent on her hot cheeks. She did not raise them.

"If you liked—if you liked, Cecil, we might ask Janet and Bessy to retain their home," resumed Lord Averil, in his thoughtful consideration. "Ashlydyat is large enough."

"Their home is decided upon," said Cecil, shaking her head. "Bessy has promised to make hers at Lady Godolphin's Folly. Lady Godolphin exacted her promise to that effect, before she decided to return to it. I was to have gone to it also. Janet goes to Scotland. I am quite sure that this place has become too painful for Janet to remain in. She has an annuity, as perhaps you know; it was money left her by mamma's sister; so that she is independent, and can live where she pleases. But I am sure she will go to Scotland, as soon as—as soon as——"

"I understand you, Cecil. As soon as Thomas shall have passed away."

The tears were glistening in her eyes. "Do you not see a great change in him?"

"A very great one. Cecil, I should like him to give you to me. Will you waive ceremony, and be mine at once?"

"At once?" she repeated, stammering and looking at him.

"I mean in the course of a week or two: as soon as you can make it convenient. Surely we have waited long enough!"

"I will see," murmured Cecil. "When a little of

this bustle, this disgrace, shall have passed away. Let it die out first."

A grave expression arose to Lord Averil's face. "It must not be very long first, Cecil: if you would be mine while your brother is in life."

"I will, I will; it shall be as you wish," she answered, the tears falling from her eyes. And before Lord Averil could make any rejoinder, she had hastily quitted him, and was standing against the window stealthily drying her wet cheeks: for the door had opened to give entrance to Thomas Godolphin.

CHAPTER VIII.

MY LADY WASHES HER HANDS.

THE summer was drawing towards its close; and so was the bankruptcy of Godolphin, Crosse, and Godolphin.—If we adhere to the style of the old firm, we only do as Prior's Ash did. Mr. Crosse, you have heard, was out of it actually and officially, but people, in speaking or writing of the firm, forgot to leave out his name. One or two maddened sufferers raised a question of his liability, in their hopeless desperation; but they gained nothing by the motion: Mr. Crosse was as legally separated from the Godolphins as if he had never been connected with them.—The labour, the confusion, and the doubt, attendant upon most bankruptcies, was nearly over, and creditors knew the best and the worst. The dividends would be, to use a common expression, shamefully small, when all was told: they might have been even smaller (not much, though) but that Lord Averil's claim on the sixteen thousand pounds, the value of the bonds, was not allowed to enter into the accounts. Those bonds and all connected with them were sunk in silence so complete, that at length some outsiders began to ask whether they and their reported loss had not been a myth altogether.

Thomas Godolphin had given up everything, even to the watch in his pocket, the signet ring upon his finger. The latter was returned to him. The jewellery of the Miss Godolphins was given up. Maria's jewellery was given up. In short, there was nothing that was not given up. The fortune of the Miss Godolphins, consisting of money and bank shares, was of course gone with the rest. The money had been in the bank at interest; the shares were now worthless. Janet alone had an annuity of about a hundred a year, rather more, which nothing could deprive her of: the rest of the Godolphins were reduced to beggary. Worse off were they than any of their clamorous creditors, since for them all had gone: houses, lands, money, furniture, personal belongings. But that Thomas Godolphin would not long be in a land where these things are required, it might have been a question how he was for the future to get sufficient of them to live.

The arrangement hinted at by Lord Averil had been carried out, and that nobleman was now the owner of Ashlydyat and all that it contained. It may have been a little departing from the usual order of the law in such cases to dispose of it by private arrangement; but it had been done with the full consent of all parties concerned. Even the creditors, who of course showed themselves ready to cavil at everything, were glad that the cost of a public sale by auction should be avoided. A price had been put upon Ashlydyat, and Lord Averil gave it without a dissentient word; and the purchase of the furniture, as it stood, was undoubtedly advantageous to the sellers.

Yes, Ashlydyat had gone from the Godolphins. But Thomas and his sisters remained in it. There had been no battle with Thomas on the score of his remain-

ing. Lord Averil had clasped his friend's hands within his own, and in a word or two of emotion had given him to understand that his chief satisfaction in its purchase had been the thought that he, Thomas, would remain in his own home, as long—as long—— Thomas Godolphin understood the broken words: as long as he had need of one. "Nothing would induce me to enter upon my habitation in it until then," continued Lord Averil. "So be it," said Thomas, quietly, for he fully comprehended the feeling, and the gratification it brought to the conferrer of the obligation. "I shall not keep you out of it long, Averil." The same words, almost the same words that Sir George Godolphin had once spoken to his son: "I shall not keep you and Ethel long out of Ashlydyat."

So Thomas remained at Ashlydyat with his broken health, and the weeks had gone on; and the summer was now drawing to an end, and more things beside it. Thomas Godolphin was beginning to be better understood than he had been at the time of the crash, and people were repenting of the cruel blame they had so freely hurled upon him. The early smart of the blow had faded away, and with it the prejudice which had unjustly, though not unnaturally, distorted their judgment, and buried for the time all kindly impulse. Perhaps there was not a single creditor, whatever might be the extent of the damage he had suffered by the bank, but would have stretched out his hand and given more gold, if by that means he could have saved the life of Thomas Godolphin. They learnt to remember that the fault had not lain with him: they believed that if by the sacrifice of his own life he could have averted the calamity he would have cheerfully sacrificed it; they knew that his days were as one long mourn-

ing, for them, individually—and they took shame to themselves for having been so bitter against him, Thomas Godolphin.

Not so in regard to George. *He* did not regain his place in their estimation: and if they could have hoisted Mr. George on a pole in front of the bank and cast at him a few rotten eggs and other agreeable missiles, it had been a comforting relief to their spleen. Had George been condemned to stand at the bar of a public tribunal by the nobleman he so defrauded, half Prior's Ash would have gone to recreate their feelings by staring at him during the trial, and made it into a day of jubilee. Harsh epithets, exceedingly unpleasant when taken personally, were freely lavished on him, and would be for a long while to come. He *had* wronged them: and time alone will suffice to wash the ever-present remembrance of such wrongs out.

He had been at Prior's Ash. Gay George still. So far as could be seen, the calamity had not much affected *him*. Not a line showed itself on his fair, smooth brow, not a shade less of colour on his bright cheek, not a gray thread in his luxuriant hair, not a cloud in his dark-blue eye. Handsome, fascinating, attractive as ever was George Godolphin: and he really seemed to be as gay and light of temperament. When any ill-used creditor attacked him outright—as some did, through a casual meeting in the street, or other lucky chance—George was triumphant George still. Not a bit of shame did he seem to take to himself—but so sunny, so fascinating was he, as he held the hands of the half-reluctant grumbler, and protested it should all come right some time, that the enemy was won over to conciliation for the passing moment. It was impossible to help admiring George Godolphin; it was impossible

to avoid liking him ; it was impossible, when brought face to face with him, not to be taken with his frank plausibility : the crustiest sufferer of them all was in a degree subdued by it. Prior's Ash understood that the officers of the bankruptcy "badgered" George a great deal when under his examinations ; but George only seemed to come out of it the more triumphant. Safe on the score of Lord Averil, all the rest was in comparison light ; and easy George never lost his good humour or his self-possession. He appeared to come scot-free out of everything. Those falsified accounts in the bank books, that many another might have been held responsible for and punished, he emerged from harmless. It was conjectured that the full extent of these false entries never was discovered by the commissioners : Thomas Godolphin and Mr. Hurde alone could have told it : and Thomas preferred to let the odium of loosely-kept books, of reckless expenditure of money, fall upon himself, rather than betray George. Were the whole thing laid bare and declared, it could not bring a single fraction of benefit to the creditors, so, in that point of view, it was as well to let it rest. Are these careless, sanguine, gay-tempered men always lucky ? It has been so asserted ; and I do think there's a great deal of truth in it. Most unequivocally lucky in this instance was George Godolphin.

It was of no earthly use asking him where all the money had gone—to what use this sum had been put, to what use the other—George could not tell. He could not tell any more than they could ; he was as much perplexed over it as they were. He ran his white hand unconsciously through his shining golden hair, hopelessly trying his best to account for a great many items that nobody living could have accounted for.

All in vain. Heedless, off-handed George Godolphin ! He appeared before those inquisitive officials somewhat gayer in attire than was needful. A sober suit, rather of the seedy order than bran new, might have been deemed appropriate at such a time ; but George Godolphin gave no indication of consulting any such rules of propriety. George Godolphin's refined good taste had kept him from falling into the loose and easy style of dress which some men so strangely favour in the present day, putting a gentleman in outward aspect on a level with the roughs of society. George, though no coxcomb, had been addicted to dress well and expensively ; and George appeared inclined to do the same thing still. They could not take him to task on the score of his fine broadcloth, or of his neatly-finished boot ; but they did bend their eyes meaningly on the massive gold chain which crossed his white waistcoat ; on the costly appendages which dangled from it ; on the handsome gold repeater which he more than once took out, as if weary of the passing hours. Mr. George received a gentle hint that those articles, however ornamental to himself, must be confiscated to the bankruptcy ; and he resigned them with a good grace. The news of this little incident travelled abroad, as an interesting anecdote connected with the proceedings, and the next time George saw Charlotte Pain, she told him he was a fool to walk into the camp of the Philistines with pretty things about him. But George was not wilfully dishonest (if you can by any possibility understand that assertion, after what you know of his past doings), and he replied to Charlotte that it was only right the creditors should make spoil of his watch and anything else he possessed. The truth, were it defined, being, that George was only dishonest when

driven so to be. He had made free with the bonds of Lord Averil, but he could not be guilty of the meanness of hiding his personal trinkets.

Three or four times now had George been at Prior's Ash. People wondered why he did not remain; what it was that took him again and again to London. The very instant he found that he could be dispensed with at Prior's Ash, away he flew; not to return to it again until imperatively demanded. The plain fact was that Mr. George did *not* like to face Prior's Ash. For all the easy self-possession, the gay good-humour he displayed to its inhabitants, the place had become utterly distasteful to him, almost unbearable; he shunned it and hated it as a pious Roman Catholic hates and shuns purgatory. For that reason, and for no other, George did his best to escape from it.

He had seen Lord Averil. And his fair face had betrayed its shame as he said a few words of apology for what he had done—of thanks for the clemency shown him—of promises for the future. "If I live, I'll make it good to you," he murmured. "I did not think to *steal* them, Averil; I did not, on my solemn word of honour. I thought I should have replaced them before anything could be known. Your asking for them immediately—that you should do so seemed a very fatality—upset everything. But for that, I might have weathered it all, and the house would not have gone. It was no light pressure that forced me to touch them—Heaven alone knows the need and the temptation."

And the meeting between the brothers? No eye saw it; no ear heard it. Good Thomas Godolphin was dying from the blow, dying before his time; but not a word of harsh reproach was given to George. How

George defended himself—or whether he attempted to defend himself, or whether he let it wholly alone—the public never knew.

Lady Godolphin's Folly was no longer in the occupancy of the Verralls or of Mrs. Pain: Lady Godolphin had returned to it. Not a day aged; not a day altered. Time flitted most lightly over Lady Godolphin. Her bloom-tinted complexion was delicately fresh as ever; her dress was as becoming, her flaxen locks were as youthful. She came with her servants and her carriages, and she took up her abode at the Folly, in all the splendour of the old days. Her income was large, and the misfortunes which had recently fallen on the family did not affect it. Lady Godolphin washed her hands of these misfortunes. She washed her hands of George. She told the world that she did so. She spoke of them openly to the public in general, to her acquaintance in particular, in a slighting, contemptuous sort of manner, as we are all apt to speak of the ill-doings of other people. They don't concern us, and it's rather a condescension on our part to blame them at all. This was no concern of Lady Godolphin's. She told everybody it was not. George's disgrace did not reflect itself upon the family, and of him she—washed her hands. No: Lady Godolphin could not see that this break-up caused by George should be any reason whatever why she or the Miss Godolphins should hide their heads and go mourning in sackcloth and ashes. Many of her old acquaintances in the county agreed with Lady Godolphin in her view of things, and helped by their visits to make the Folly gay again.

To wash her hands of Mr. George, was, equitably speaking, no more than that gentleman deserved: but Lady Godolphin also washed her hands of Maria. On

her return to Prior's Ash she had felt inclined to espouse Maria's part; to sympathise with, and pity her; and she drove down in state one day and left her carriage with its powdered coachman and footman to pace to and fro in Crosse-street before the bank, while she went in. She openly avowed to Maria that she considered herself in a remote degree the cause which had led to her union with George Godolphin: she supposed that it was her having had Maria so much at the Folly, and afterwards on the visit at Broomhead, which had led to the attachment. As a matter of course she regretted this, and wished there had been no marriage, now that George had turned out so gracelessly. If she could do anything to repair it she would: and, as a first step, she offered the Folly as a present asylum to Maria. She would be safe there from worry, and—from George.

Maria scarcely at first understood. And when she did, her only answer was to thank Lady Godolphin, and to stand out, in her quiet, gentle manner, but untiringly and firmly, for her husband. Not a shade of blame would she acknowledge to be due to him; not a reverence would she render him the less: her place was with him, she said, though the whole world turned against him. It vexed Lady Godolphin.

"Do you know," she asked, "that you must choose between your husband and the world?"

"In what way?" replied Maria.

"In what way! When a man acts in the manner that George Godolphin has acted, he puts a barrier between himself and society. But there's no necessity for the barrier to extend to you, Maria. If you will come to my house for a while, you will find this to be the case—that it will not extend to you."

“You are very kind, Lady Godolphin. My husband is more to me than the world.”

“Do you approve of what he has done?”

“No,” replied Maria. “But it is not my place to show that I blame.”

“I think it is,” said Lady Godolphin, in the hard tone she used when her opinion was crossed.

Maria was silent. She never could contend with any one.

“Then you prefer to hold out against the world,” resumed Lady Godolphin; “to put yourself beyond its pale! It is a bold step, Maria.”

“What can I do?” was Maria’s pleading answer. “If the world throws me over because I will not turn against my husband, I cannot help it. I married him for better and for worse, Lady Godolphin.”

“The fact is, Maria,” retorted my lady sharply, “that you have loved George Godolphin in a ridiculous degree.”

“Perhaps I have,” was Maria’s subdued answer, the colour dyeing her face with various reminiscences. “But surely there was no sin in it, Lady Godolphin: he is my husband.”

“And you cling to him still?”

“Oh yes.”

Lady Godolphin rose. She shrugged her shoulders as she drew her white lace shawl over them, she glanced at her coquettish blue bonnet in the pier-glass as she passed it, at her blush-rose cheeks. “You have chosen your husband, Maria, in preference to me; in preference to the world; and from this moment I wash my hands of you, as I have already done of him.”

It was all the farewell she took: and she went out to

her carriage thinking what a blind, obstinate, hardened woman was Maria Godolphin. She saw not what it had cost that "hardened" woman to bear up before her; that her heart was nigh unto breaking; that the sorrow laid upon her was greater than she well knew how to battle with.

CHAPTER IX.

A BROKEN IDOL.

GEORGE GODOLPHIN leaned against a pillar of the terrace opening from the dining-room. They had not left the bank yet as a residence, but this was their last day in it. It was the last day they could stop in it, and why they should have lingered in it so long was food for gossip in Prior's Ash. On the morrow the house would be public property. Men would walk in and ticket all the things, apportioning them their place in the catalogue, their order in the days of sale, and the public would crowd in also, to feast their eyes upon the household gods hitherto sacred to George Godolphin.

How did he feel as he stood there? Was his spirit in heaviness, as was the case under similar misfortune of another man—if the written record he left to us may be trusted—that great and noble poet, ill-fated in death as in life, whose transcendent genius has since found no parallel:—

“It was a trying moment, that which found him,
Standing alone beside his desolate hearth,
While all his household gods lay shivered round him.”

Did George Godolphin find it trying? Was his hearth desolate? Not desolate in the full sense that

that other spoke, for George Godolphin's wife was with him still.

She had stood by him. When he first returned to Prior's Ash, she had greeted him with her kind smile, with words of welcome. She spoke not of what that awful shock had been to her, the discovery of the part he had played in Lord Averil's bonds; she spoke not of another shock, not less awful. Whatever effect that unpleasant scandal, mentioned by Margery, which it seems had formed a staple dish for Prior's Ash, may have been taking upon her in secret and silence, she gave no sign of it to George. He never suspected that any such whisper, touching his worthy self, had been breathed to her. Mr. George best knew what grounds there might be for it: whether it bore any foundation, or whether it was but one of those breezy rumours, false as the wind, which have their rise in ill-nature, and in that alone: but however it may have been, whether true or false, he could not divine that such poison would be dropped into his wife's ear. If he had thought her greeting to him strange, her manner more utterly subdued than there was need for, her grief of greater violence, he attributed it all to the recent misfortunes: and Maria made no other sign.

The effects had been bought in at Ashlydyat, but these had not: and this was the last day, almost the last hour of his occupancy of them. One would think his eyes would be cast around in lingering looks of regretful farewell—upon the chairs and tables, on the scattered ornaments, down to the rich carpets, up to the valuable and familiar pictures. Not a bit of it. George's eyes were bent on his nails which he was trimming to his satisfaction, and he was carolling in an under-tone a strain of a new English opera.

They were to go out that evening. At dusk. At dusk, you may be sure. They were to go forth from their luxurious home, and enter upon obscure lodgings, and go altogether down in the scale of what the world calls society. Not that the lodgings were so obscure, taking them in the abstract; obscure indeed, as compared with their home at the bank, very obscure beside the home they had sometime thought to remove to—Ashlydyat.

George could not be prudent: he could not, had his life depended on it, be *saving*. When the time approached that they might no longer stay in the bank, and Maria, in writing to him in London, reminded him of that fact, and asked where they were to go and what they were to do, George had returned for answer that there was no hurry—she might leave it all to him. But the next day brought him down; and he went out, off-hand, and engaged some fashionable rooms at three guineas a week. Maria was dismayed when she heard the price. How was it to be paid? George did not see precisely how himself, just at present: but, to his sanguine disposition, the paying of ten guineas a week for lodgings would have looked quite easy. Maria had more forethought, and prevailed. The three-guinea a week rooms were given up, and some taken at a third of the rent. She would have wished a lower rent still; but George laughed at her.

He stood there in his careless beauty, his bright face bent downwards, his tall fine form noble in its calmness. The sun was playing with his hair, bringing out its golden tints, and a smile illumined his face, as he went on with his song. Whatever may have been George Godolphin's shortcomings in some points of view, none could reproach him on the score of his per-

sonal attractions. All the old terror, the carking care, had gone out of him with the easy bankruptcy—easy in its results to him, compared to what might have been—and gay George, graceless George, was himself again. There may have been something deficient in his moral organization, for he really appeared to take no shame to himself for what had occurred. He stood there calmly self-possessed; the perfect gentleman, so far as appearance and manners could make him one; looking as fit to bend his knee at the proud court of St. James's as ever that stately gentleman his father had looked when her Majesty touched him with the flashing sword-blade and bid him rise up Sir George.

“Once would my heart with the wildest emotion,
Throb, dearest Eily, when near me wert thou;
Now I regard thee with deep——”

The strain was interrupted, and George, as he ceased it, glanced up. Meta, looking, it must be confessed, rather black about the hands and pinafore, as if Margery had not had time to attend to her within the last hour, came running in. George shut up his knife and held out his arms.

“Papa, are we to have tea at home, or after we get into the lodgings?”

“Ask mamma,” responded George.

“Mamma told me to ask you. She doesn't know, she says. She's too busy to talk to me. She's getting the great box on to the stand.”

“She's doing what?” cried George, in a quick accent.

“Getting the great box on to the stand,” repeated Meta. “She's going to pack it. Papa, will the lodgings be better than this? Will there be a big

garden? Margery says there'll be no room for my rocking-horse. Won't there?"

Something in the child's questions may have grated on the fine ear of George Godolphin, had he stayed to listen to them. However lightly the bankruptcy might be passing over George's mind on his own score, he regretted its results most bitterly for his wife and child. To see them turned from their home, condemned to descend to the inconveniences and obscurity of these poor lodgings, was the worst pill George Godolphin had ever had to swallow. He would have cut off his right arm to retain them in their position; ay, and also his left: he could have struck himself down to the earth in his rage for the disgrace he had brought on them.

Hastening up the stairs, he entered his bedroom. It was in a litter; boxes and wearing-apparel lying about. Maria, flushed and breathless, was making great efforts to drag a cumbrous trunk on a stand, or small bench, for the convenience of filling it. No very extensive efforts, either; for she knew that such might harm her at present in her feeble strength.

George raised the trunk to its place with one lift of his manly arms, and then forced his wife, with more gentleness, into a chair.

"How can you be so imprudent, Maria?" broke from him in a vexed tone, as he stood before her.

"I was not hurting myself," she answered. "The things must be packed."

"Of course they must. But not by you. Where's Margery?"

"Margery has a great deal to do. She cannot do it all."

"Then where's Sarah?" resumed George, crossly and sharply.

“Sarah’s in the kitchen getting our dinner ready. We must have some to-day.”

“Show me what the things are, and I will pack them.”

“Nonsense! As if it would hurt me to put the things into the box! You never interfered with me before, George.”

“You never attempted this sort of work before. I won’t have it, Maria. Were you in a fit state of health to be knocking about, you might do it; but you shall certainly not, as it is.”

It was his self-reproach that was causing his angry tone; very keenly at that moment was it making itself heard. And Maria’s spirits were not that day equal to sharpness of speech. It told upon her, and she burst into tears.

How terribly the signs of distress vexed him, no words could tell. He took them as a tacit reproach to himself. And they were so: however unintentional on her part such reproach might be.

“Maria, I won’t have this; I can’t bear it,” he cried, his voice hoarse with emotion. “If you show this temper, this childish sorrow before me, I shall run away.”

He could have cut his tongue out for so speaking—for his stinging words; for their stinging tone. “Temper! Childish sorrow!” George chafed at himself in his self-condemnation: he chafed—he knew how unjustly—at Maria.

Very, very unjustly. She had not annoyed him with reproaches, with complaints, as some wives would have done; she had not, to him, shown symptoms of the grief that was wearing out her heart. She had been all considerate to him, bearing up bravely whenever he was at Prior’s Ash. Even now, as she dried away the

rebellious tears, she would not let him think they were being shed for the lost happiness of the past, but murmured some feeble excuse about a headache.

He saw through the fond deceit; he saw all the generosity; and the red shame mantled in his fair face as he bent down to her, and his voice changed to one of the deepest tenderness.

“If I have lost you this home, Maria, I will get you another,” he whispered. “Only give me a little time. Don’t grieve before me if you can help it, my darling: it is as though you ran a knife into my very soul. I can bear the loud abuse of the whole world, better than one silent reproach from you.”

And the sweet words came to her as a precious balm. However bitter had been the shock of that one rude awaking, she loved him fondly still. It may be, that she loved him only the more: for the passions of the human heart are wayward and wilful, utterly unamenable to control.

Margery came into the room, with her hands and arms full. George may have been glad of the divertisement, and he turned upon her, his voice resuming its anger. “What’s the meaning of this, Margery? I come up here and I find your mistress packing and lugging boxes about. Can’t you see to these things?”

Margery was as cross as George that day, and her answer in its sharpness rivalled his. Direct reproof Margery had never presumed to offer her master, though she would have liked to do it amazingly, for not a single condemner held a more exaggerated view of Mr. George’s past delinquencies than she.

“I can’t be in ten places at once. And I can’t do the work of ten people. If you know them that can, sir, you’d better get ’em here instead of me.”

“Did I not ask you if you should want assistance in the packing, and you told me that you should not?” retorted George.

“No more I don’t want it,” was the answer. “I can do all the packing that is to do here, if I am let alone, and allowed to take my own time and do it in my own way. In all that chaffing and changing of houses when my Lady Godolphin chose to move Ashlydyat’s things to the Folly, and when they had to be moved back afterwards in accordance with Sir George’s will, who did the best part of the packing and saw to everything, but me? It would be odd if I couldn’t put up a few gowns and shirts, but I must be talked to about help!”

Poor Margery was evidently in an explosive temper. Time back George would have put her down with a haughty word of authority or with joking mockery, as the humour might have taken him. He did not to-day. There had been wrong inflicted upon Margery; and it may be that he was feeling it. She had lost the poor savings of years—the Brays had not allowed them to be great ones; she had lost the money bequeathed to her by Mrs. Godolphin. All had been in the bank, and all had gone. In addition to this, there were personal discomforts. Margery found the work of a common servant thrown upon her in her old age: an under girl, Sarah, was her only help now at the bank, and Margery alone would follow their fallen fortunes to these lodgings.

“Do as you please,” was all George said. “But your mistress shall not meddle with it.”

“If my mistress chooses to set on and get to work behind my back, I can’t stop it. She knows there’s no need to do it. If you’ll be so good, ma’am,” turning

to her mistress, "as just let things alone and leave 'em to me, you'll find they'll be done. What's a few bits of clothes to pack?" indignantly repeated Margery. "And there's nothing else that we may take. If I was to put up but a pair of sheets or a tin dish-cover, I should be called a thief, I suppose."

There lay the great grievance of Margery's present mood—that all the things, save the "few bits of clothes," must be left behind. Margery, for all her crustiness and her out-spoken temper, was a most faithfully-attached servant, and it may be questioned if she did not feel the abandoning of their goods in a keener degree than did even Maria and George. The things were not hers: every article of her own, even to a silver cream-jug, which had been the boasted treasure of her life, she had been allowed to retain; even to the little work-box of white satin-wood, with its landscape on the lid, the trees of which Miss Meta had been permitted to paint red, and the cottage blue. Not an article of Margery's but she could remove was sacred to her: but in her fidelity she did resent bitterly the having to leave the property of her master and mistress, the not being at liberty to pack up so much as a "tin dish-cover."

Maria, debarred from assisting, wandered in her restlessness through some of the more familiar rooms. It was well that she should pay them a farewell visit. From the bedroom where the packing was going on, to George's dressing-room, thence to her own sitting-room, thence to the drawing-room, all on that floor. She lingered in all. A home sanctified by years of happiness cannot be quitted without regret, even when exchanged at pleasure for another; but to turn out of it in humiliation, in poverty, in hopelessness, is a

trial of the sharpest and sorest kind. Apart from the pain, the feeling was a strange one. The objects crowding these rooms; the necessary furniture costly and substantial; the elegant ornaments of various shapes and sorts, the chaste works of art, not necessary, but so luxurious and charming, had hitherto been their own—hers in conjunction with her husband's. They might have done what they pleased with them. Had she broken that Wedgwood vase, there was no one to call her to account for it; had she or George chosen to make a present of that rare basket in medallion, with its speaking likenesses of the beauties of the whilom gay French court, there was nobody to say them nay; had they felt disposed to change that fine piano for a different one, the liberty to do so was theirs. They had been the owners of these surroundings, the master and mistress of the house and its contents. And now? Not a single article belonged to them: they were but tenants on sufferance: the things remained, but their right in them had passed away. If she dropped and broke only that pretty trifle which her hand was touching now, she must answer for the mishap. The feeling, I say, was a strange one.

She walked through the rooms with a dry eye and hot brow. Tears seemed long ago to have gone away from her. It is true she had been surprised into a few that day, but the lapse was unusual. Why should she make this farewell visit to the rooms? she began asking herself. She needed it not to remember them. Visions of the past came crowding upon her memory; of this or the other happy day spent in them: of the gay meetings when they had received the world; of the sweet home hours when she had sat there alone with him of whom she had well-nigh made an idol—her husband. Mis-

taken idolatry, Mrs. George Godolphin! mistaken, useless, vain idolatry. Was there ever an earthly idol yet that did not mock its worshipper? I know of none. We make an idol of our child, and the time comes when it will turn round to sting us: we make an idol of the god or goddess of our passionate love, and how does it end?

Maria sat down and leaned her head upon her hand, thinking more of the past than of the future. She was getting to have less hope in the future than was good for her: it is a bad sign when a sort of apathy with regard to it steals over us; a proof that the mind is not in the healthy state that it ought to be. A time of trial, of danger, was approaching for Maria, and she seemed to contemplate the possibility of her sinking under it with strange calmness. A few months back, the bare glance at such a fear would have unhinged her: she would have clung to her husband and Meta, and sobbed out her passionate prayer to God in her dire distress, not to be taken from them. Things had changed: the world in which she had been so happy had lost its charm for her; the idol in whose arms she had sheltered herself turned out not to have been of pure gold: and Maria Godolphin began to realise the forcible truth of the words of the wise King of Jerusalem—that the world and its dearest hopes are but vanity.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. PAIN TAKING LEAVE.

MRS. CHARLOTTE PAIN, in her looped-up petticoats and nicely-fitting kid boots, was tripping jauntily through the streets of Prior's Ash. Mrs. Pain had been somewhat vacillating in regard to her departure from that long-familiar town; she had reconsidered her determination of quitting it so abruptly; and on the day she went out of Lady Godolphin's Folly, she entered on some stylish lodgings in the heart of Prior's Ash. Only for a week or two; just to give her time to take proper leave of her friends, she said: but the weeks had gone on and on, and Charlotte was there yet.

Society had been glad to keep Charlotte. Society of course shuts its lofty ears to the ill-natured tales spread by low-bred people: that is, when it finds it convenient so to do. Society had been pleased to be deaf to any little obscure tit-bits of scandal which had made vulgarly free with Charlotte's name: and as to the vague rumours connecting Mr. Verrall with George Godolphin's ruin, nobody knew whether that was not pure scandal too. But if not, why—Mrs. Pain could not be justly reflected on for the faults of Mr. Verrall. So Charlotte was as popular and dashing in her hired

rooms as she had been at Lady Godolphin's Folly, and she had remained in them until now.

But now she was really going. This was the last day of her sojourn at Prior's Ash, and Charlotte was walking about unceremoniously, bestowing her farewells on anybody who would receive them. It almost seemed as if she had only waited to witness the removal from the bank of Mr. and Mrs. George Godolphin.

She walked along in exuberant spirits, nodding her head to everybody: up at windows, in at doorways, to poor people on foot, to rich ones in carriages; her good-natured smile was everywhere. She rushed into shops and chatted familiarly, and won the shopkeepers' hearts by asking if they were not sorry to lose her. She was turning out of one when she came pop on the rector of All Souls'. Charlotte's petticoats went down in a swimming reverence.

"I am paying my farewell visits, Mr. Hastings. Prior's Ash will be rid of me to-morrow."

Not an answering smile crossed the rector's face: it was cold, impassive, haughtily civil: almost as if he were thinking that Prior's Ash might have been none the worse, had it been rid of Mrs. Charlotte Pain before.

"How is Mrs. Hastings to-day?" asked Charlotte.

"She is not well."

"No! I must try and get a minute to call in on her. Adieu for the present. I shall see you again, I hope."

Down sunk the skirts once more, and the rector lifted his hat in silence. In the ultra-politeness, in the spice of sauciness gleaming out from her flashing eyes, the clergyman read incipient defiance. But if Mrs. Pain feared that he might be intending to favour her with a little public clerical censure, she was entirely mis-

taken. The rector washed his hands of Mrs. Pain, as Lady Godolphin did of her stepson, Mr. George. He walked on, condemnation and scorn lighting his face.

Charlotte walked on: and burst into a laugh as she did so. "Was he afraid to forbid my calling at the Rectory?" she asked herself. "He would have liked to, I know. I'll go there now."

She was not long reaching it. But Isaac was the only one of the family she got to see. He came to her charged with Mrs. Hastings' compliments—she felt unequal to seeing Mrs. Pain.

"What's the matter with her?" inquired Charlotte, suspecting the validity of the excuse.

"She is never very well now," was the somewhat evasive answer: and Isaac, though civilly courteous, was as cold as his father. "When do you say you leave us, Mrs. Pain?"

"To-morrow morning. And you? I heard you were going to London. You have found some situation there, George Godolphin told me."

Isaac threw his eyes—they were just like the rector's—straight and full into her face. In her present spirit, half mischievous, half defiant, she had expressly paraded the name of George as her informant, and Isaac thoroughly understood her. Charlotte's eyes were dancing with a variety of expressions, but the chief one was good-humoured malice.

"I am going into a bank in Lombard-street. Mr. Godolphin got me in."

"You won't like it," said Charlotte.

"I daresay not. But I think myself lucky to get it."

"There'll be one advantage," continued Charlotte, good-naturedly—"that you can come and see us. You

know Mrs. Verrall's address. Come as often as you can; every Sunday if you like; any week-day evening: I'll promise you a welcome beforehand."

"You are very kind," briefly returned Isaac. They were walking slowly to the gate, and he held it open for her.

"What's Reginald doing?" she asked. "Have you heard from him lately?"

"Not very lately. You are aware that he is in London under a master of navigation, preparatory to passing as second officer. As soon as he has passed, he will be going to sea again."

"When you write to him, give him our address, and tell him to come and see me. And now good-bye," added Charlotte, heartily. "And mind you don't show yourself a muff, Mr. Isaac, but come and see us. Do you hear?"

"I hear," said Isaac, smiling as he thawed to her good-humour. "I wish you a pleasant journey, Mrs. Pain."

"Merci bien. If—I say, is that Grace?"

Charlotte had cast her eyes to the Rectory's upper windows. Mrs. Akeman, her baby in her arms—a great baby now—stood at one.

"She is spending the afternoon with us," explained Isaac.

"And wouldn't come down to me!" retorted Charlotte. "She's very polite. Tell her so from me, Isaac. Good-bye."

The church clock boomed out five as Charlotte passed it, and she came to a stand-still of consideration. It was the hour at which she had ordered her dinner to be ready.

"Bother dinner!" decided she. "I can't go home

for that. I want to see if they are in their lodgings yet. Is that you, Mrs. Bond?"

Sure enough, Mrs. Bond had come into view, and was halting to bob down to Charlotte. Her face looked pale and pinched. There had been no supply of strong waters to-day.

"I be a'most starving, ma'am," said she. "I be a waiting here to catch the parson, for I've been to his house, and they says he's out. I dun know as it's of any good seeing of him, either. 'Tain't much as he have got to give away now."

"I am about to leave, Mrs. Bond," cried Charlotte, in her free and communicative humour.

"More's the ill-luck, and I have heered on't," responded Mrs. Bond. "Everybody as is good to us poor goes away, or dies, or fails, or sum'at. There'll be soon naught left for us but the work'us. Many's the odd bit o' silver you have give me at times, ma'am."

"So I have," said Charlotte, laughing. "What if I were to give you this, as a farewell remembrance?"

She took a half-sovereign out of her purse and held it up. Mrs. Bond gasped: the luck seemed too great to be realised.

"Here, you may have it," said Charlotte, dropping it into the shaking and dirty hand held out. "But you know you are nothing but an old sinner, Mrs. Bond."

"I knows I be," humbly acquiesced Mrs. Bond. "'Tain't of no good denying of it to you, ma'am: you be up to things."

Charlotte laughed, taking the words, perhaps, rather as a compliment. "You'll go and change this at the nearest gin-shop, and you'll reel into bed to-night blind-fold. That's the only good you'll do with it. There! don't say I quitted Prior's Ash, forgetting you."

She walked on rapidly, leaving Mrs. Bond in her ecstasy of delight to waste her thanks on the empty air. The lodgings George had taken were at the opposite end of the town, nearer to Ashlydyat, and to them Charlotte was bound. They were not on the high road, but in a quiet side lane. The house, low and commodious, and built in the cottage style, stood in the midst of a productive garden. A small grass-plot and some flowers were before the front windows, but the rest of the ground was filled with fruit and vegetables. Charlotte opened the green gate and walked up the path, which led direct to the house. A narrow path, with hollyhocks rising on either side it.

The front door was open to a small hall, and Charlotte went in, finding her way, and turned to a room on the left: a cheerful, good-sized, old-fashioned parlour, with a green carpet, and pink flowers on its walls. There stood Margery, laying out some teacups and some bread-and-butter. Her eyes opened at the sight of Mrs. Pain.

“Are they come yet, Margery?”

“No,” was Margery’s short answer. “They’ll be here in half an hour, maybe; and that’ll be before I want ’em—with all the rooms and everything to see to, and only me to do it.”

“Is that all you are going to give them for tea?” cried Charlotte, looking contemptuously on the bread-and-butter. “I should surprise them with a little dainty dish or two on the table. It would look cheering: and they might soon be cooked.”

“I dare say they might, where there’s conveniences and time,” wrathfully returned Margery, who relished Mrs. Pain’s interference as little as she relished her presence. “The kitchen we are to have is about as big

as a rat-hole, and my hands are full enough this evening without dancing out to buy meats, and trying if the grate 'll cook 'em."

"Of course you will light the fire here," said Charlotte, turning to the grate. "I see it is laid."

"It's not cold," grunted Margery.

"But the fire will be a pleasant welcome. I'll do it myself."

She caught up a box of matches which stood on the mantelpiece, and set fire to the faggots underneath the coal. Margery took no notice one way or the other. The fire in a fair way of burning, Charlotte hastened from the house, and Margery breathed freely again.

Not for long. A short space, and Charlotte was back again, accompanied by a boy, bearing sundry parcels. There was a renowned comestible shop in Prior's Ash, and Charlotte had been ransacking it. She had also been home for a small parcel on her own account; but that did not contain eatables.

Taking off her cloak and bonnet, she made herself at home. Critically surveying the bedrooms; visiting the kitchen to see that the kettle boiled; lighting the lamp on the tea-table, for it was dark then; demanding an unlimited supply of plates, and driving Margery nearly wild with her audacity. But Charlotte was doing it all in good feeling, in her desire to render this new asylum bright-looking at the moment of their taking possession of it; to cheat the first entrance of some of its bitterness for Maria. Whatever may have been Mrs. Charlotte Pain's faults—and Margery, for one, gave her credit for plenty—she was capable of generous impulses. It is probable that in the days gone by, a feeling of jealousy, of spite, had rankled in her heart against George Godolphin's wife: but that had worn

itself out; had been finally lost in the sorrow felt for Maria since the misfortunes had fallen. When the fly drove up to the door, and George brought in his wife and Meta, the bright room, the well-laden tea-table greeted their surprised eyes, and Charlotte was advancing with open hands.

“I thought you’d like to see somebody here to get things comfortable for you, and I knew that cross-grained Margery would have enough to do between the boxes and her temper,” she cried, taking Maria’s hands. “How are you, Mr. George?”

George found his tongue. “This is kind of you, Mrs. Pain.”

Maria felt that it *was* kind: and in her tide of gratitude, as her hand lay in Charlotte’s warm grasp, she almost forgot that cruel calumny. Not quite: it could not be quite forgotten, even momentarily, until earth and its passions should have passed away.

“And mademoiselle?” continued Charlotte. Mademoiselle, little gourmande that she was, was raised on her toes, surveying the table with curious eyes. Charlotte lifted her in her arms, and held up to her view a glass jar, something inside it the colour of pale amber. “This is for good children, this is.”

“That’s me,” responded Meta, smacking her lips. “What is it?”

“It’s—let me read the label—it’s pine-apple jelly. And that’s boned fowl; and that’s gélatine de veau; and that’s pâté de lapereau aux truffes—if you understand what it all means, petite marmotte. And—there—you can look at everything and find out for yourself,” concluded Charlotte. “I am going to show mamma her bedroom.”

It opened from the sitting-room: a commodious

arrangement, as Charlotte observed, in case of illness. Maria cast her eyes round it, and saw a sufficiently comfortable chamber. It was not their old luxurious chamber at the bank; but luxuries and they must part company now.

“Look here,” said Charlotte, dropping her voice to a whisper.

She was pointing with her finger to the chest of drawers. Placed back, the only object on its white covering was the miniature red trunk which Maria had given into her charge in the summer.

“Oh, thank you! Thank you greatly for taking care of it, Mrs. Pain.”

“It is safe here now. You and the enemy have done with each other. Though it were heaped full of diamonds, they’d not come and look after them here. Is it?”

“What? Full of diamonds?” Maria shook her head. “Indeed, I told you truth, Mrs. Pain, when I said there was nothing in it of value. It contains but a few letters and papers, and a lock or two of my dead children’s hair.”

“*In-deed!*” exclaimed Charlotte, with a sweetly innocent look. “Then you and I are different, Mrs. George Godolphin. Were the like calamity to happen to my husband—if I had one—I should consider it a praiseworthy virtue to save all I could from the grasp of the spoilers. Come along. We shall have Meta going into all the good things.”

Charlotte reigned at the head of the table that night, triumphantly gay. Margery waited with a stiffened neck and pursed-up lips. Nothing more: there were no other signs of rebellion. Margery had had her say out with that one memorable communication, and from thenceforth her lips were closed for ever. Did the

woman repent of having spoken?—did she now think it better to have let doubt be doubt? It is hard to say. She had made no further objection to Mrs. Pain in words; she intended to make none. If that lady filled Miss Meta to bursting to-night with the pine-apple jelly and the boned fowl, and the other things with unpronounceable names, which Margery regarded as rank poison when regaling Miss Meta, *she* should not interfere. The sin might lie on her master and mistress's head.

It was close upon ten when Charlotte rose to go. She put on her things, and bent over Maria in greeting. "Take care of yourself, Mrs. George," she said, in a kindly tone. "Now that the worst is over, things will soon come round again. And if you should find it convenient to get rid of Meta for a while, send her up to me in London. I'll take great care of her."

Margery stood with the door open. George was taking down his hat.

"I protest and declare you shall not, Mr. George Godolphin!" exclaimed Charlotte, divining his intention of seeing her home. "Do you suppose I am going to take you from your wife, the first evening she is in this strange place?"

"Do you suppose I am going to let you be run away with in the dangerous streets of Prior's Ash?" returned George, with laughing gallantry.

"I'll guard against that," returned Charlotte. "I am old enough to take care of myself."

"Why, I should not be away ten minutes."

"Now, you know when I say a thing, I mean it," said Charlotte, in a peremptory tone. "You are not going with me, Mr. George. I have a reason for wishing to go home by myself. There."

George could only yield. Charlotte had spoken still

in her kindness to Maria. In spite of her own attractive presence, Maria's spirits were lower than they might have been : and Charlotte generously left her the society of her husband. As to walking through the streets of Prior's Ash alone, or through any other streets, Charlotte had no foolish fears, but would as soon go through them by night as by day.

As a proof of this, she did not proceed direct home-wards, but turned up a road that led to the railway. She had no objection to a stroll that moonlight night, and she had a fancy for seeing what passengers the ten o'clock train brought, which was just in.

It brought none. None that Charlotte could see : and she was preparing to turn back on the dull road, when a solitary figure came looming on her sight in the distance. He was better than nobody, regarding him in Charlotte's social point of view : but he appeared to be advanced in years. She could see so much before he came up.

Charlotte strolled on, gratifying her curiosity by a good stare. A tall, portly man, with a fresh colour and snow-white hair. She was passing by him, when he lifted his face, which had been bent, and turned it towards her. The recognition was mutual, and she darted up to him, and gave his hand a hearty shake. It was Mr. Crosse.

"Good gracious me ! We all thought you never meant to come back again !"

"And I'd rather not have come back, Mrs. Pain, than come to hear what I am obliged to hear. I went streaming off for weeks from Pau, where I was staying, a confounded, senseless tour into Spain, leaving no orders for letters to be sent to me, and so I heard nothing. What *has* brought about this awful calamity ?"

“What calamity?” asked Charlotte—knowing perfectly well all the while.

“What calamity!” repeated Mr. Crosse, who was rapid in speech and hot in temper. “The failure of the bank—the Godolphins’ ruin. What else?”

“Oh, that!” slightly returned Charlotte. “That’s stale news now. Folks are forgetting it. Queen Anne’s dead.”

“What brought it about?” reiterated Mr. Crosse, neither the words nor their tone pleasing him.

“What does bring such things about?” rejoined Charlotte. “Want of money, I suppose. Or bad management.”

“But there was no want of money; there was no bad management in the Godolphins’ house,” raved Mr. Crosse, becoming excited. “I wish you’d not play with my feelings, Mrs. Pain.”

“Who is playing with them?” cried Charlotte. “If it was not want of money, if it was not bad management, I don’t know what else it was.”

“I was told in London, as I came through it, that George Godolphin has been playing up old Rosemary with everything, and that Verrall has helped him,” continued Mr. Crosse.

“Folks will talk,” said bold Charlotte. “I was told—it was the current report in Prior’s Ash—that the stoppage had occurred through Mr. Crosse drawing his money out of the concern.”

“What an unfounded assertion!” exclaimed that gentleman in choler. “Prior’s Ash ought to have known better.”

“So ought those who tell you rubbish about George Godolphin and Verrall,” coolly affirmed Charlotte.

“Where’s Thomas Godolphin?”

“At Ashlydyat. He’s in luck. My Lord Averil has bought it all in as it stands, and Mr. Godolphin remains in it.”

“He is ill, I hear?”

“Pretty near dead, *I* hear,” retorted Charlotte. “My lord is to marry Miss Cecilia.”

“And where’s that wicked George?”

“If you call names, I won’t answer you another word, Mr. Crosse.”

“I suppose *you* don’t like to hear it,” he returned, in so pointed a manner that Charlotte might have felt it as a lance-shaft. “Well, where is he?”

“Just gone into lodgings with his wife and Margery and Meta. I have been taking tea with them. They left the bank to-day.”

Mr. Crosse stood, nodding his head in the moonlight, and communing aloud with himself. “And so—and so—it is all a smash together! It *is* as bad as was said.”

“It couldn’t be worse,” cried Charlotte. “Prior’s Ash won’t hold up its head for many a day. It’s no longer worth living in. I leave it for good to-morrow.”

“Poor Sir George! It’s a good thing he was in his grave. Lord Averil could have prosecuted George, I hear.”

“Were I to hear to-morrow that I could be prosecuted for standing here and talking to you to-night, I shouldn’t wonder,” was the answer.

“What on earth did he do with the money? What went with it?”

“Report runs that he founded a cluster of almshouses with it,” said Charlotte, demurely. “Ten old women, who are to be found in coals and red cloaks, and half-a-crown a week.”

The words angered him beyond everything. Nothing

could have been more serious than his mood; nothing could savour of levity, of mockery, more than hers. "Report runs that he has been giving fabulous prices for horses to make presents of," angrily retorted Mr. Crosse, in a tone of pointed significance.

"Not a bit of it," returned undaunted Charlotte. "He only gave bills."

"Good-night to you, Mrs. Pain," came the next words, haughtily and abruptly; and Mr. Crosse turned to continue his way.

Leaving Charlotte standing there. No other passengers came down from the station: there were none to come: and she turned to retrace her steps to the town. She walked slowly and moved her head from side to side, as if she would take in all the familiar features of the landscape by way of a farewell in anticipation of the morrow; which was to close her residence at Prior's Ash for ever.

PART THE THIRD.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. REGINALD MAKES A MORNING CALL.

TIME elapsed. Autumn weather had come ; and things were going on in their state of progression at Prior's Ash as things always must go on. Be it slow or fast, be it marked or unmarked, the stream of life must glide forward ; onwards, onwards ; never stopping, never turning from its appointed course that bears us straight towards eternity.

In the events that concern us nothing had been very marked. At least, not outwardly. There were no startling changes to be recorded—unless, indeed, it was that noted change in the heart of the town. The bank of which you have heard so much was no more ; but in its stead flourished an extensive ironmongery establishment—which it was to be hoped would not come to the same ignoble end. The house had been divided into two dwellings : the one, accessible by the former private entrance, was let to a quiet widow lady and her son, a young man reading for the Church ; the other had been opened in all the grandeur and glory of highly-polished steel and iron. Grates, chimney-pieces, fire-irons, fenders, scrapers, gilded lamps, ornamental gratings, and other useful things more puzzling to mention,

crowded the front windows and dazzled the admiring eyes of the passers-by. You might have thought it was gold and silver displayed there, when the sun reflected its light on the shining wares and brought out their brilliancy. Not one of the Godolphins could pass it without a keen heart-pang, but the general public were content to congregate and admire, as long as the novelty lasted.

The great crash, which had so upset the equanimity of Prior's Ash, was beginning to be forgotten as a thing of the past. The bankruptcy was at an end—save for some remaining proceedings of form which did not concern the general public, and not much the creditors. Compassion for those who had been injured by the calamity was dying out: many a home had been rendered needy—many desolate; but outside people do not make these uncomfortable facts any lasting concern of theirs. There were only two who did make them so, in regard to Prior's Ash: and they would make them so as long as their lives should last.

George Godolphin's wife was lying in her poor lodgings, and Thomas was dying at Ashlydyat. Dying so slowly and imperceptibly that the passage to the grave was smoothed, and the town began to say that he might recover yet. The wrong inflicted upon others, however unwillingly on his own part, the distress rife in many a house around, was ever present to him. It was ever present to Maria. Some of those who had lost were able to bear it; but there were others upon whom it had brought privation, poverty, utter ruin. It was for these last that the sting was felt.

A little boy had been born to Maria, and had died at the end of a few days. He was baptised Thomas. "Name him Thomas: it will be a remembrance of my

brother," George Godolphin had said. But the young Thomas died before the elder one. The same disorder which had taken off two of Maria's other infants took off him—convulsions. "Best that it should be so," said Maria, with closed eyes and folded hands.

Somehow she could not get strong again. Lying in bed, sick and weak, she had time to ruminate upon the misfortunes which had befallen them: the bitter, hopeless reminiscence of the past, the trouble and care of the present, the uncertainty of the future. To dwell upon such themes is not good for the strongest frame; but for the weak it is worse than can be expressed. Whether it was that, or whether it was a tendency to keep sick, which might have arisen without any mental trouble at all, Maria did not get strong. Mr. Snow sent her no end of tonics; he ordered her all kinds of renovating dainties; he sat and chatted and joked with her by the half-hour together: and it availed not. She was about again, as the saying runs, but she remained lamentably weak. "You don't make an effort to arouse yourself," Mr. Snow would say, thumping his stick in displeasure upon the floor as he spoke. Well, perhaps she did not: the plain fact was, that there was neither the health nor the spirit within her to make the effort.

Circumstances were cruelly against her. She might have battled with the bankruptcy; with the shock and the disgrace; she might have battled with the discomforts of their fallen position, with the painful consciousness of the distress cast into many a home, with the humiliation dealt out to herself as her own special portion by the pious pharisees around; she might have battled with the vague prospects of the future, hopeless though they looked: women equally sensitive, good, refined as Maria have had to contend with all this, and have

survived it. But what Maria could not battle with; what had told upon her heart and her spirit worse than all the rest, was that dreadful shock touching her husband. She had loved him passionately; she had trusted him wholly; in her blind faith she had never cast so much as a thought to the *possibility* that he could be untrue to his allegiance: and she had been obliged to learn that—infidelity forms part of a man's frail nature. It had dashed to the ground the faith and love of years; it had outraged every feeling of her heart; it seemed to have destroyed her trust in all mankind. Implicit faith! pure love! trust that she had deemed stronger than death!—all had been rent in one moment, and the shock had been greater than was her strength to endure. It was as when one cuts a cord asunder. Anything, anything but this! She could have borne with George in his crime and disgrace, and clung to him when the world shunned him; had he been sent out to Van Diemen's Land the felon that he might have been, she could have crept by his side and loved him still. But this was different. To a woman of refined feelings, as was Maria, loving trustingly, it was as the very sharpest point of human agony. It must be such. She had reposed calmly in the belief that she was all in all to him: and she awoke to find that she was no more to him than were others. They had lived, as she fondly thought, in a world of their own, a world of tenderness, of love, of unity; she and he alone; and now she learnt that his world at least had not been so exclusive. Apart from more sacred feelings that were outraged, it brought to her the most bitter humiliation. She seemed to have sunk down to a level she scarcely knew with what. It was not the broad and bare infidelity: at that a gentlewoman scarcely likes to glance;

but it was the fading away of all the purity and romance which had enshrined them round, as with a halo, they alone, apart from the world. In one unexpected moment, as a flash of lightning will blast a forest tree and strip it of its foliage, leaving it bare—withered—helpless—so had that blow rent the heart's life of Maria Godolphin. And she did not get strong.

Yes. Thomas Godolphin was dying at Ashlydyat, Maria was breaking her heart in her lonely lodgings, Prior's Ash was suffering in its homes; but where was the cause of it all—Mr. George? Mr. George was in London. Looking after something to do, he told Maria. Probably he was. He knew that he had his wife and child upon his hands, and that something must be done, and speedily, or the wolf would come to the door. Lord Averil, good and forgiving as was Thomas Godolphin, had promised George to try and get him some post abroad—for George had confessed to him that he did not care to remain in England. But the prospect was a remote one at best; and it was necessary that George should be exerting himself while it came. So he was in town looking after the something, and meanwhile not by any means breaking *his* heart in regrets, or living like an anchorite up in a garret. Maria heard from him, and of him. Once a week, at least, he wrote to her, sometimes oftener; affectionate and gay letters. Loving words to herself, kisses and stories for Meta, teasings and jokes for Margery. He was friendly with the Verralls—which Prior's Ash wondered at; and would now and then be seen riding in the Park with Mrs. Charlotte Pain—the gossip of which was duly chronicled to Maria by her gossiping acquaintance. Maria was silent on the one subject, but she did write a word of remonstrance to him about his

friendship with Mr. Verrall. It was scarcely seemly, she intimated, after what people had said. George wrote her word back that she knew nothing about it; that people had taken up a false notion altogether. Verrall was a good fellow at heart; what had happened was not his fault, but the fault of certain men with whom he, Verrall, had been connected; and that Verrall was showing himself a good friend now, and he did not know what he should do without him.

“A warm bright day like this, and I find you moping and stewing on that sofa! I’ll tell you what it is, Mrs. George Godolphin, you are trying to make yourself into a chronic invalid.”

Mr. Snow’s voice, in its serio-comic accent, might be heard at the top of the house as he spoke. It was his way.

“I am better than I was,” answered Maria. “I shall get well some time.”

“Some time! It’s to be hoped you will. But you are not doing much yourself towards it. Have the French left you a cloak and bonnet, pray?”

Maria smiled at his joke. She knew he alluded to the bankruptcy commissioners. When Mr. Snow was a boy, the English and French were at war, and he generally used the word French in a jesting way to designate enemies.

“They left me all,” she said.

“Then be so good as put them on. I don’t terminate this visit until I have seen you out of doors.”

To contend would be more trouble than to obey. She wrapped herself up and went out with Mr. Snow. Her steps were almost too feeble to walk alone.

“See the lovely day it is! And you, an invalid, suffering from nothing but dumps, not to be out in it!

It's nearly as warm as September. Halloo, young lady! are you planting cabbages?"

They had turned an angle and come upon Miss Meta. She was digging away with a child's spade, scattering the mould over the path; her woollen shawl, put on for warmth, turned hind-before, and her hat fallen back with the ardour of her labours. David Jekyl, who was digging to purpose close by, was grumbling at the scattered mould on his clean paths.

"I'll sweep it up, David; I'll sweep it up!" the young lady said.

"Fine sweeping it 'ud be!" grunted David.

"I declare it's as warm as summer in this path!" cried Mr. Snow. "Now mind, Mrs. George, you shall stop here for half an hour; and if you get tired there's a bench to sit upon. Little damsel, if mamma goes indoors, you tell me the next time I come. She is to stay out."

"I'll not tell of mamma," said Meta, throwing down her spade and turning her earnest eyes, her rosy cheeks, full on Mr. Snow.

He laughed as he walked away. "You are to stay out for the half-hour, mind you, Mrs. George. I insist upon it."

Direct disobedience would not have been expedient, if only in the light of example to Meta; but Maria had rather been out on any other day, or been ordered to any other path. This was the first time she had seen David Jekyl since the bank had failed, and his father's loss was very present to her.

"How are you, David?" she inquired.

"I be among the middlins," shortly answered David.

"And your father? I heard he was ill?"

"So he is ill. He couldn't be worscr."

"I suppose the coming winter is against him?"

"There be other things again him as well as the coming winter," returned David. "Fretting, for one."

Ah, how bitter it all was! But David did not mean to allude in any offensive manner to the past, or to hurt the feelings of George Godolphin's wife. It was his crusty way.

"Is Jonathan better?" she asked.

"He ain't of much account, he ain't, since he got that hurt," was David's answer. "A doing about three days' work in a week! It's to be hoped times 'll mend."

Maria walked slowly to and fro in the sunny path, saying a word or two to David now and then, but choosing safer subjects; the weather, the flowers under his charge, the vegetables already nipped with frost. She looked very ill. Her face thin and white, her soft sweet eyes larger and darker than was natural. Her hands were wrapped in the cloak for warmth, and her steps were unequal. Crusty David actually ventured on a little bit of civility.

"*You* don't seem to get about over quick, ma'am."

"Not very, David. But I feel better than I did."

She sat down on the bench, and Meta came flying to her, spade in hand. Might she plant a gooseberry-tree, and have all the gooseberries off it next year for herself?

Maria stroked the child's hair from her flushed face as she answered. Meta flew off to find the "tree," and Maria sat on, plunged in a train of thought which the question had led to. Where should they be at the gooseberry season next year? In that same dwelling? Would George's prospects have become more certain then?

"Now then! Is that the way you dig?"

The sharp words came from Margery, who had looked out at the kitchen window and caught sight of Miss Meta rolling in the mould. The child jumped up laughing, and ran into the house for her skipping-rope.

"Have I been out half an hour, do you think, David?" Maria asked by-and-by.

"Near upon 't," said David, without lifting his back or his eyes.

She rose to pursue her way slowly in-doors. She was so fatigued—and there had been, to say, no exertion—that she felt as if she could never stir out again. The mere putting on and taking off her cloak was almost beyond her. She let it fall from her shoulders, put off her bonnet, and sank down in an easy-chair.

From this she was aroused by hearing the garden gate hastily open. Quick footsteps came up the path, and a manly voice said something to David Jekyl in a free, joking tone. She bounded up, her cheek flushing to hectic, her heart beating. Could it be George?

No, it was her brother, Reginald Hastings. He came in with a great deal of unnecessary noise and clatter. He had arrived from London only that morning, he proceeded to tell Maria, and was going up again by the night train.

"I say, Maria, how ill you look!"

Very ill indeed just then. The excitement of sudden expectation had faded away, leaving her whiter than before. Dark circles were round her eyes, and her delicate hands, more feeble, more slender than of yore, moved restlessly on her lap.

"I have been very feverish the last few weeks," she said. "I think I am stronger: But I have been out for a walk and am tired."

"What did the little shaver die of?" asked Reginald.

"Of convulsions," she answered, her bodily weariness too great to speak in anything but a tone of apathy. "Why are you going up again so soon? Have you got a ship?"

Reginald nodded. "We have orders to join tomorrow at twelve. She's the *Mary*, bound for China, six hundred tons. I knew the mother would never forgive me if I didn't come down to say good-bye, so I thought I'd have two nights of it in the train."

"Are you going second officer, Reginald?"

"Second officer!—no. I have not passed."

"Regy!"

"They are a confounded lot, that board!" broke out Mr. Reginald in an explosive tone. "I don't believe they know their own business; and as to passing any one without once turning him, they won't do it. I should like to know who has the money! You pay your guinea, and you don't pass. Come up again next Monday, they say. Well, you do go up again, as you want to pass; and you pay another half-guinea. I did; and they turned me again; said I didn't know seamanship. The great owls! not know seamanship! I! They took me, I expect, for one of those dainty middies in Green's service who walk the deck in kid gloves all day. If there's one thing I have at my fingers' ends it is seamanship. I could navigate a vessel all over the world—and be hanged to the idiots! You can come again next Monday, they said to me. I wish the *Times* would show them up!"

"Did you go again?"

"Did I!—no," fumed Reginald. "Just to add to their pockets by another half-guinea! I hadn't got it to give; Maria. I just flung the whole lot over, and went down to the first ship in the dock and engaged myself."

“As what?” she asked.

“As A. B.”

“A. B.?” repeated Maria, puzzled. “You don’t mean—surely you don’t mean before the mast?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Oh, Reginald!”

“It doesn’t make much difference,” cried Reginald, in a slighting tone. “The second mates in some of those ships are not much better off than the seamen: you must work, and the food’s pretty much the same, except at the skipper’s table. Let a fellow get up to be first mate, and he is in tolerably smooth water; but until then he must rough it. After this voyage I’ll go up again.”

“But you might have shipped as third mate.”

“I might—if I had taken my time to find a berth. But who was to keep me the while? It takes fifteen shillings a week at the Sailors’ Home, besides odds and ends for yourself that you can’t do without—smoke and things. I couldn’t bear to ask them for more at home. Only think how long I have been on shore this time, Maria. I was knocking about in London for weeks over my navigation, preparing to pass.—And for the mummies to turn me at last!”

Maria sighed. Poor Reginald’s gloomy prospects were bringing her pain.

“There’s another thing, Maria,” he resumed. “If I had passed for second mate, I don’t see how I could go out as such. Where was my outfit to come from? An officer—if he is on anything of a ship—must be spruce, and have proper toggery. I am quite certain that to go out as second mate on a good ship would have cost me twenty pounds, for additional things that I couldn’t do without. You can’t get a sextant under three pounds,

second-hand, if it's worth having. You know I never could have come upon them for twenty pounds at home, under their altered circumstances."

Maria made no reply. Every word was going to her heart.

"Whereas, in shipping as common seaman, I don't want to take much more than you might tie in a handkerchief. A fo'castle fellow can shift any way aboard. And there's one advantage," ingenuously added Reginald: "if I take no traps out with me, I can't lose them."

"But the discomfort?" breathed Maria.

"There's enough of that any way at sea. A little more or less of it is not of much account in the long run. It's all in the voyage. I wish I had never been such a fool as to choose the sea. But I did; so it's of no use kicking at it now."

"I wish you were not going as you are!" said Maria, earnestly. "I wish you had shipped as third mate!"

"When a sailor can't afford the time to ship as he would, he must ship as he can. Many a hundred has done the same before me. To one third mate that's wanted in the port of London, there are scores and scores of A. B. seamen."

"What does mamma say to it?"

"Well, you know she can't afford to be fastidious now. She cried a bit, but I told her I should be all right. Hard work and fo'castle living won't break bones. The parson told me——"

"Don't, Reginald!"

"Papa, then. He told me it was a move in the right direction, and if I would only go on so, I might make up for past shortcomings. I say, Isaac told me to give you his love."

"Did you see much of him?"

“No. On a Sunday now and then. He doesn’t much like his new place. They are dreadfully over-worked, he says. It’s quite a different thing from what the bank was down here.”

“Will he not stop in it?”

“Oh, he’ll stop in it. Glad, too. It won’t answer for him to be doing nothing, when they can hardly keep themselves at home with the little bit of money screwed out from what’s put aside for the Chisholms.”

Reginald never meant to hurt her. He but spoke so in his thoughtlessness. He rattled on.

“I saw George Godolphin last week. It was on the Monday, the day that swindling board first turned me back. I flung the books anywhere, and went out miles, to walk my passion off. I got into the Park, to Rotten-row. It’s precious empty at this season, not more than a dozen horses in it; but who should be coming along but George Godolphin and Mrs. Pain with a groom behind them. She was riding that beautiful horse of hers that she used to cut a dash with here in the summer; the one that folks said George gave——” Incautious Reginald coughed down the conclusion of his sentence, whistled a bar or two of a sea-song, and then resumed:

“George was well mounted too.”

“Did you speak to them?” asked Maria.

“Of course I did,” replied Reginald, with slight surprise. “And Mrs. Pain began scolding me for not having been to see her and the Verralls. She made me promise to go the next evening. They live at a pretty place on the banks of the Thames. You take the rail at Waterloo-bridge.”

“Did you go?”

“Well, I did, as I had promised. But I didn’t care much. I had been at my books all day again, and in

the evening, quite late, I started. When I got there I found it was a tea-fight."

"A tea-fight!" echoed Maria, rather uncertain what the expression might mean.

"A regular tea-fight," repeated Reginald. "A dozen folks, ladies mostly, dressed up to the nines: and there was I in my worn-out old sailor's jacket. Charlotte began blowing me up for not coming to dinner, and she made me go in to the dining-room and had it brought up for me. Lots of good things! I haven't tasted such a dinner since I've been on shore. Verrall gave me some champagne."

"Was George there?" inquired Maria, putting the question with apparent indifference.

"No, George wasn't there. Charlotte said if she had thought of it she'd have invited Isaac to meet me: but Isaac was shy of them, she added, and had never been down once, though she had asked him several times. She's a good-natured one, Maria, is that Charlotte Pain?"

"Yes," quietly responded Maria.

"She told me she knew how young sailors got out of money in London, and she shouldn't think of my standing the cost of responding to her invitation; and she gave me a sovereign."

Maria's cheeks burnt. "You did not take it, Reginald?"

"Didn't I! It was like a godsend. You don't know how scarce money has been with me. Things have altered, you know, Maria. And Mrs. Pain knows it, too, and she has got no stuck-up nonsense about her. She made me promise to go and see them when I had passed.—But I have not passed," added Reginald, by way of parenthesis. "And she said if I was at fault for a home the next time I was locking out for a ship, she'd give

me one, and be happy to see me. And I thought it very kind of her, for I am sure she meant it. Oh—by the way—she said she thought you'd let her have Meta up for a few weeks."

Maria involuntarily stretched out her hand—as if Meta were there, and she would clasp her and hold her from some threatened danger. Reginald rose.

"You are not going yet, Regy!"

"I must. I only ran in for a few minutes. There's Grace to see and fifty more folks, and they'll expect me home to dinner. I'll say good-bye to Meta as I go through the garden. I saw she was there; but she did not see me."

He bent to kiss her. Maria held his hand in hers. "I shall be thinking of you always, Reginald. If you were but going under happier circumstances!"

"Never mind me, Maria. It will be up-hill work with most of us, I suppose, for a time. I thought it the best thing I could do. I couldn't bear to come upon them for more money at home."

"Yours will be a hard life."

"A sailor's is that, at best. Don't worry about me. I shall make it out somehow. You make haste, Maria, and get strong. I'm sure you look sick enough to frighten folks."

She pressed his hands between hers, and the tears were filling her eyes as she raised them—their expression one wild yearning. "Reginald, try and do your duty," she whispered, in an imploring tone. "Think always of Heaven, and try and work for it. It may be very near. I have got to think of it a great deal now."

"It's all right, Maria," was the careless and characteristic answer. "It's a religious ship I'm going in this

time. We have had to sign articles for divine service on board at half-past ten every Sunday morning."

He kissed her several times, and the door closed upon him. As Maria lay back in her chair, she heard his voice outside for some time afterwards laughing and talking with Meta, largely promising her a ship-load of monkeys, parrots, and various other live wonders.

In this way or that, she was continually being reminded of the unhappy past and their share in it; she was perpetually having brought before her its disastrous effects upon others. Poor Reginald! entering upon his hard life! This need not have been, had the means not grown scarce at home. Maria loved him the best of all her brothers, and her very soul seemed to ache with its remorse. And by some means or other, she was, as you see, frequently learning that Mr. George was not breaking *his* heart in remorse. The suffering in all ways fell upon her.

And the time went on, and Maria Godolphin grew no stronger.

CHAPTER XII.

A SHADOW OF THE FUTURE.

THE time had gone on, and Maria Godolphin, instead of growing stronger, grew weaker. Mr. Snow could do nothing more than he had done; he sent her tonic medicines still, and called upon her now and then, as a friend more than as a doctor. The strain was on the mind, he concluded, and time alone would heal it.

But Maria was worse than Mr. Snow or anybody else thought. She had been always so delicate-looking, so gentle, that her wan face, her sunken spirits, attracted less attention than they would have done in one of a more robust nature. Nobody glanced at the possibility of danger. Margery's expressed opinion, "My mistress only wants rousing," was the one universally adopted: and there may have been truth in it.

All question of Maria's going out of doors was over now. She was really not equal to it. She would lie for hours together on her sofa, the little child Meta gathered in her arms. Meta appeared to have changed her very nature: instead of dancing about incessantly, running into every mischief, she was content to nestle to her mother's bosom and listen to her whispered words, as if some foreshadowing were on her spirit that she might not long have a mother to nestle to.

You must not think that Maria conformed to the usages of an invalid. She was up before breakfast in a morning, she did not go to bed until the usual hour at night, and she sat down to the customary meals with Meta. She has risen from the breakfast-table now, on this fine morning, not at all cold for the late autumn, and Margery has carried away the breakfast-things, and has told Miss Meta, that if she'll come out as soon as her mamma has read to her and have her things put on, she can go and play in the garden.

But when the little Bible story was over, her mamma lay down on the sofa, and Meta appeared inclined to do the same. She hustled on to it and lay down too, and kissed her mamma's face, so pretty still, and began to chatter. It was a charming day, the sun shining on the few late flowers, and the sky blue and bright.

"Did you hear Margery say you might go out and play, darling? See how fine it is."

"There's nothing to play with," said Meta.

"There are many things, dear. Your skipping-rope, and hoop, and——"

"I'm tired of them," interposed Meta. "Mamma, I wish you'd come out and play at something with me."

"I couldn't run, dear. I am not strong enough."

"When shall you be strong enough? How long will it be before you get well?"

Maria did not answer. She lay with her eyes fixed outwards, her arm clasped round the child. "Meta darling, I—I—am not sure that I shall get well. I begin to think that I shall never go out with you again."

Meta did not answer. She was looking out also, her eyes staring straight up to the blue sky.

"Meta darling," resumed Maria, in a low tone, "you

had two little sisters once, and I cried when they died, but I am glad now that they went. They are in heaven."

Meta looked up more fixedly, and pointed with her finger. "Up in the blue sky?"

"Yes, up in heaven. Meta, I think I am going to them. It is a better world than this."

"And me too?" quickly cried Meta.

Maria laid her hand upon her bosom to press down the rising emotion. "Meta, Meta, if I might but take you with me!" she breathed, straining the child to her in an agony. The prospect of parting, which Maria had begun to look at, was indeed hard to bear.

"You can't go and leave me," cried Meta, in alarm. "Who'd take care of me, mamma? Mamma! do you mean that you are going to die?"

Meta burst into tears; Maria cried with her. Oh reader, reader! do you know what it is, this parting between mother and child? To lay a child in the grave is bitter grief; but to leave it to the mercy of the world!—there is nothing like unto it in human anguish.

Maria's arms were entwined around the little girl, clasping her nervously, as if that might prevent the future parting; the soft, rounded cheek was pressed to hers, the golden curls lay around.

"Only for a little while, Meta. If I go first, it will be but for a little while. You——" Maria stopped; her emotion had to be choked down.

"It is a happier world than this, Meta," she resumed, overmastering it. "There will be no pain there; no sickness, no sorrow. This world seems made up of sorrow, Meta. Oh, child! but for God's love in holding out to our view that other one, we could never bear this,

when trouble comes. God took your little sisters and brothers from it ; and—I think—He is taking me.”

Meta turned her face downwards, and laid hold of her mother with a frightened movement, her little fingers clasping the thin arms to pain.

“The winter is coming on here, my child, and the trees will soon be bare ; the snow will cover the earth, and we must wrap ourselves up from it. But in that other world there will be no winter : no cold to chill us ; no sultry summer heat to exhaust us. It will be a pleasant world, Meta, and God will love us.”

Meta was crying silently. “Let me go too, mamma.”

“In a little while, darling. If God calls me first, it is His will,” she continued, the sobs breaking from her aching heart. “I shall ask Him to take care of you after I am gone, and to bring you to me in time ; I am asking Him always.”

“Who’ll be my mamma then?” cried Meta, lifting her head in a bustle, as the thought occurred to her.

More pain. Maria choked it down, and stroked the golden curls.

“You will have no mamma then, in this world. Only papa.”

Meta paused. “Will he take me to London, to Mrs. Pain?”

The startled shock that these simple words brought to Maria cannot well be pictured : her breath stood still, her heart beat wildly. “Why do you ask that?” she said, her tears suddenly dried.

Meta had to collect her childish thoughts to tell why. “When you were in bed ill, and Mrs. Pain wrote me that pretty letter, she said if papa would take me up to London she’d be my mamma for a little while, in place of you.”

The spell was broken. The happy visions of heaven, of love, had been displaced for Maria. She lay quite silent, and in the stillness the bells of All Souls' church were heard to strike out a joyous peal on the morning air. Meta clapped her hands and lifted her face, radiant now with glee. Moods require not time to change in childhood: now sunshine, now rain. Margery opened the door.

"Do you hear 'em, ma'am? The bells for Miss Cecil. They be as glad as the day. I said she'd have it fine last night, when I found the wind had changed. I can't abear to hear wedding-bells ring out on a wet day: the two don't accord. Eh me! why here's Miss Rose a coming in!"

Rose Hastings was walking up the garden path with a quick step, nodding at Meta as she came along. That young lady slipped off the sofa, and ran out to meet her, and Maria rose up from her sick position, and strove to look her best.

"I have come for Meta," said Rose, as she entered. "Mamma thinks she would like to see the wedding." Will you let her come, Maria?"

Maria hesitated. "To the church, do you mean? Suppose she should not be good?"

"I will be good," said Meta, in a high state of delight at the prospect. "Mamma, I'll be very good."

She went with Margery to be dressed. Rose turned to her sister. "Are you pretty well this morning, Maria?"

"Pretty well, Rose. I cannot boast of much strength yet."

"I wish you would return with me and Meta. Mamma told me to try and bring you. To spend the day with us will be a change, and you need not go near the church."

“I don’t feel equal to it, Rose. I should not have the strength to walk. Tell mamma so, with my dear love.”

“Maria, I wonder they did not ask you to the wedding!”

“Do you? It is a foolish wonder, Rose. I am not sufficiently well for weddings, even had other circumstances been favourable. Cecil was here yesterday, and sat an hour with me.”

“Only fancy!—she is to be married in a bonnet!” exclaimed Rose with indignation. “A bonnet and a grey dress. I wonder Lord Averil consented to it! I should hardly call it a wedding. A bonnet!—and no breakfast!—and Bessy Godolphin and Lord Averil’s sister, who is older if anything than Bessy, for the bridesmaids!”

“Would a gayer wedding have been consistent—under the circumstances?”

Rose knitted her brow at the words, but smoothed her hand over it, remembering who was looking at her. “I—I do not see, Maria,” she hesitatingly said, “that what has passed need throw its shade on the wedding of Cecil and Lord Averil.”

“And the state of Thomas Godolphin?”

“Ah, yes, to be sure! I was not thinking of him. But it is very dreadful to be married without a wreath and a veil, and with only a couple of old bridesmaids.”

“And by only one clergyman,” added Maria, her lips parting with a smile. “Do you think the marriage will stand good, Rose?”

Rose felt inclined to resent the joke. The illusions of the wedding-day were, in her eyes, absolutely necessary to the marriage ceremony. Meta came in, ready; as full of bustling excitement as ever; eager to be gone.

She kissed her mamma in careless haste, and was impatient because Rose lingered to say a word. Maria watched her down the path ; her face and eyes sparkling, her feet dancing with eagerness, her laughter ringing in the air.

“She has forgotten already her tears for the parting that must come,” murmured Maria. “How soon, I wonder, after I shall be gone, will she forget me?”

She laid her temples lightly against the window-frame, as she looked dreamily at the blue sky ; as she listened dreamily to the sweet bells that rang out so merrily in the ears of Prior’s Ash.

CHAPTER XIII.

NEARER AND NEARER FOR THOMAS GODOLPHIN.

PRIOR'S ASH lingered at its doors and its windows, curious to witness the outer signs of Cecilia Godolphin's wedding. The arrangements for it were to them more a matter of speculation than of certainty, since various rumours had gone afloat, and were eagerly caught up, although of the most contradictory character. All that appeared certain as yet was—that the day was charming and the bells were ringing.

How the beadle kept the gates that day, he alone knew. That staff of his was brought a great deal more into requisition than was liked by the sea of noses pressing there. And when the first carriage came, the excitement in the street was great.

The *first* carriage! There were but two; that and another. Prior's Ash turned up its disappointed nose, and wondered, with Rose Hastings, what the world was coming to.

It was a chariot drawn by four horses. The livery of the postilions and the coronet on the panels proclaimed it to be Lord Averil's. He sat inside it with Thomas Godolphin. The carriage following it was Lady Godolphin's, and appeared to contain only ladies, all wearing

bonnets and coloured gowns. The exasperated gazers, who had bargained for something very different, set up a half groan.

They set up a whole one, those round the gates, when Lord Averil and his friend alighted. But the groan was not one of exasperation, or of anger. It was a low murmur of sorrow, of sympathy, and it was called forth by the appearance of Thomas Godolphin. It was some little time now since Thomas Godolphin had been seen in public, and the change in him was startling. He walked forward, leaning on the arm of Lord Averil, lifting his hat to the greeting that was breathed around; a greeting of sorrow meant, as he knew, not for the peer, but for him, and his fading life. The few scanty hairs stood out to their view as he uncovered his head, and the ravages of the disease that was killing him were all too conspicuous on his wasted features.

“God bless him! He’s very nigh upon the grave.”

Who said it of the crowd, Thomas Godolphin could not tell, but the words and their accent, full of rude sympathy, came distinctly upon his ear. He quitted the viscount’s arm, turned to them, and raised his hands with a solemn meaning.

“God bless you all, my friends. I am indeed near upon the grave. Should there be any here who have suffered injury through me, let them forgive me for it. It was not intentionally done, and I may almost say that I am expiating it with my life. May God bless you all, here and hereafter!”

Something like a sob burst from the astonished crowd. But that he had hastened on with Lord Averil, they might have fallen on their knees and clung to him in their flood-tide of respect and love.

The Reverend Mr. Hastings stood in his surplice at

the altar. He, too, was changed. The keen, vigorous, healthy man had now a grey, worn look. He could not forget the blow; minister though he was, he could not forgive George Godolphin. He was not quite sure that he forgave Thomas for not having looked more closely after his brother and the bank generally: had he done so, the calamity might never have occurred. Every hour of the day reminded Mr. Hastings of his loss, in the discomforts which had necessarily fallen on his home, in the position of his daughter Maria. George Godolphin had never been a favourite of his: he had tried to like him in vain. It was strange that where so many owed to the fascination of George Godolphin, the rector of All Souls' and his daughter Grace had held aloof; had disliked him. Could it have been some mysterious friendly warning of future ill which would make itself heard in the heart of Mr. Hastings and whisper him not to give away Maria? At any rate, it had not answered. He *had* given her, and he had striven to like her husband afterwards: but he had not fully succeeded: he never would have succeeded without this last blow, which had drawn him under its wheels with so many others. The rector of All Souls' was a man of severe judgment, and rumour had made too free with gay George's name for him to find favour with the rector.

He stood there, waiting for the wedding-party. A few ladies were in the church in their pews, and Rose Hastings sat there with Meta. All eyes were turned to the door in expectation: but when the group entered there was not much to see. No cortége, no marshaling, no veils, no plumes, no anything! But that Rose was prepared for it, she would have shrieked out with indignation.

Lord Averil was the first to enter. Cecilia Godolphin came next with Thomas. She wore a light-grey silk robe, and a plain white bonnet, trimmed inside with orange-blossoms. The Honourable Miss Averil and Bessy Godolphin followed; old in Rose Hastings' opinion, certainly old for bridesmaids; their silk dresses of a darker shade of grey, and their white bonnets without the orange-blossoms. Lady Godolphin was next, more resplendent than any, in a lemon brocaded dress that stood on end with richness.

Did the recollection of the last wedding service he had performed for a Godolphin cause the rector of All Souls' voice to be subdued now, as he read? Seven years ago he had stood there as he was standing to-day, George and Maria before him. How had that promising union ended? And for the keeping of his sworn vows, George best knew what he had kept and what he had broken. The rector was thinking of that past ceremony now.

This one was over. The promises were made, the register signed, and Lord Averil was leading Cecilia from the church, when the rector stepped before them and took her hand.

"I pray God that your union may be more happy than some others have been," he said. "That, in a great degree, rests with you, Lord Averil. Take care of her."

Her eyes filled with tears, but the viscount grasped his hand warmly. "I will; I will."

"Let *me* bless you both, Averil!" broke in the quiet voice of Thomas Godolphin. "It may be that I shall not see you again to do it."

"Oh, but we shall meet again; you must not die yet," exclaimed Lord Averil, with feverish eagerness.

“My friend, I would rather part with the whole world, save Cecil, than with you.”

Their hands lingered together—and separated. Not very long now would Thomas keep them out of Ashlydyat.

The beadle was nobbing his stick on the heads and noses with great force, and the excited crowd pushed and danced round that travelling carriage, but they made their way to it. The placing in Cecil and the taking his place beside her seemed to be but the work of a moment, so quickly did it pass, and Lord Averil, a pleasant smile upon his face, bowed to the shouts on either side as the carriage threaded its way through the throng. Not until it had got into clear ground did the postilions put their horses to a canter, and the bridegroom and bride were fairly away on their bridal tour.

There was more ceremony needed to place the ladies in the other carriage. Lady Godolphin's skirts, in their extensive richness, took five minutes to arrange of themselves, ere a space could be found for Thomas Godolphin beside her. The footman held the door for him.

“No,” he said; “I will follow you presently.”

Bessy felt startled. “You will not attempt to walk?” she said, leaning forward.

He smiled at her; smiled at the utter futility of such an attempt now. The time for walking to Ashlydyat was past for Thomas Godolphin.

“A fly is coming for me, Bessy. I have a call or two to make.”

Lady Godolphin's carriage drove away, and Thomas turned into the rectory. Mrs. Hastings, grey, worn, old, ten years older than she had been six months before,

came forward to greet him, commiseration in every line of her countenance.

“I thought I would say good-bye to you,” he said, as he held her hands in his. “It will be my only opportunity. I expect this is my last quitting of Ashlydyat.”

“Say good-bye?” she faltered. “Are you—are you—so near——”

“Look at me,” quietly said Thomas, answering her unfinished sentence.

But there was an interruption. Bustling little feet and a busy little tongue came upon them. Miss Meta had broken from Rose and run in alone, throwing her straw hat aside as she entered.

“Uncle Thomas! Uncle Thomas! I saw you at the wedding, Uncle Thomas.”

He sat down and took the child on his knee. “And I saw Meta,” he answered. “How is mamma? I am going to see her presently.”

“Mamma’s not well,” said Meta, shaking her head. “Mamma cries often. She was crying this morning. Uncle Thomas”—lowering her voice and speaking slowly—“mamma says she’s going to heaven.”

There was a startled pause. Thomas broke it by laying his hand upon the golden-haired head.

“I trust we are all going there, Meta. A little earlier or a little later, as God shall will. It will not much matter which.”

A few minutes’ conversation, and Thomas Godolphin went out to the fly which waited for him. Bexley, who was with it, helped him in.

“To Mrs. George Godolphin’s.”

The attentive old retainer—older by twenty years than Thomas, but younger in health and vigour—carefully assisted his master up the garden path. Maria

saw the approach from the window. Why it was she knew not, but she was feeling unusually ill that day: scarcely able to rise to a sitting position on the sofa. Thomas was shocked at the alteration in her, and involuntarily thought of the child's words, "Mamma says she's going to heaven."

"I thought I should like to say farewell to you, Maria," he said, as he drew a chair near her. "I did not expect to find you looking so ill."

She had burst into tears. Whether it was the unusual depression of her own spirits, or his wan face, emotion overcame her.

"It has been too much for both of us," he murmured, holding her hands. "We must forgive him, Maria. It was done in carelessness, perhaps, but not in wilfulness."

"No, no; not in wilfulness," she whispered. "He is my husband and your brother still."

There was a lull in their emotion. Thomas gave her some of the details of the wedding, and she was beguiled to ask different questions. "Do you know what George is likely to do?" he suddenly inquired.

"No; I wish I did know. He talks much of this promise of Lord Averil's, and says he is looking out for something to do in the meanwhile. The uncertainty troubles me greatly. We cannot live on nothing."

"Has he sent you any money lately?" asked Thomas, in a voice of hesitation.

Maria's face flushed. "He gave me ten pounds when he was at home last, and it is not spent yet."

Thomas leaned his head on his hand musingly. "I wonder where he gets it?"

Maria was silent. To say, "I think he is helped by Mr. Verrall," might only have given Thomas fresh

pain. "It is very kind of you to come to see me," she said, changing the subject. "I feel it dull here all day alone."

"Why do you not come to Ashlydyat sometimes? You know we should be glad to see you."

She shook her head. "I cannot go out, Thomas. And indeed I am not strong enough for it now."

"But, Maria, you should not give way to this grief; this weakness. You are young; you have no incurable complaint as I have."

"I don't know," she sighed. "At times I feel as though I should never be well again. I—I—have been so reproached, Thomas; so much blame has been cast on me by all people; it has been as if *I* had made away with their money; and you know that I was as innocent as they were. And there have been other things. If—if——"

"If what?" asked Thomas, leaning over her.

She was sitting back upon the sofa, her fair young face wan and colourless, her delicate hands clasped together, as in apathy. "If it were not for leaving Meta, I should be glad to die!"

"Hush, Maria! Rather say you are glad to live for her sake. George may, by some means or other, become prosperous again, and you may once more have a happy home. You are young, I say; you must bear up against this weakness."

"If I could but pay all we owe; our personal debts!" she whispered, unconsciously giving utterance to the vain longing that was ever working in her heart. "Papa's nine thousand pounds—and Mrs. Bond's ten pounds—and the Jekyls—and the tradespeople!"

"If *I* could but have paid!" he rejoined, in a voice broken by emotion. "If I could—if I could—I should

have gone easier to the grave. Maria, we have a God, remember, who sees all our pangs, all our bitter sorrow: but for Him, and my trust in Him, I should have died long ago of the pain. Things have latterly been soothed to me in a most wonderful manner. I seem to feel that I can leave all the sorrow I have caused to Him, trusting to Him to shed down the recompence. We never know until our need of it comes what His mercy is."

Maria covered her face with her hand. Thomas rose.

"You are not going?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, for I must hasten home. This has been a morning of exertion, and I find there's no strength left in me. God bless you, Maria!"

"Are we never to meet again?" she asked, as he held her thin hands in his, and she looked up at him through her blinding tears.

"I hope we shall meet again, Maria, and be together for ever and for ever. The threshold of the next world is opening to me: this is closing. Fare you well, child; fare you well."

Bexley came to him as he opened the parlour door. Thomas asked for Margery: he would have said a kind word to her. But Margery had gone out.

Maria stood at the window, and watched him with her wet eyes as he walked down the path to the fly, supported by Bexley. The old man closed the door on his master and took his seat by the driver. Thomas looked forth as they drove away, and smiled a last farewell.

A farewell in the deepest sense of the word. It was the last look, the last smile, that Maria would receive in this life from Thomas Godolphin.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PEACEFUL HOUR IN THE PORCH OF ASHLYDYAT.

IN the old porch at Ashlydyat of which you have heard so much, sat Thomas Godolphin. An invalid chair had been placed there, and he lay back on its pillows in the afternoon sun of the late autumn. A warm, sunny autumn had it been; a real "Eté de St. Martin." He was feeling wondrously well; almost, but for his ever-present sensation of weakness, quite well. His fatigue of the previous day—that of Cecil's wedding—had left no permanent effects upon him, and had he not known thoroughly his own hopeless state, he might have fancied this afternoon that he was about to get well all one way.

Not in his looks. Pale, wan, ghastly were they; the shadow of the grim, implacable visitor that was so soon to come was already on them; but the face in its calm stillness told of ineffable peace: the brunt of the storm had passed.

The white walls of Lady Godolphin's Folly glittered brightly in the distance; the dark-blue sky was seen through the branches of the trees, growing bare and more bare against the coming winter; the warm rays of the sun fell on Thomas Godolphin. In his hand he

held a book from which others than Thomas Godolphin had derived courage and consolation—"God is love." He was reading at that moment of the great love of God towards those who strive, as he had done, to live for him; he looked up, repeating the sentence: "He loves them in death and will love them through the never-ending ages of the world to come." Just then his eyes fell on the figure of Margery, who was advancing towards Ashlydyat. Thomas closed his book, and held out his hand.

"My mistress told me you'd have said Good-bye to me yesterday, Mr. Thomas, and it was just my ill luck to be out. I'd gone to take the child's shoes to be mended—she wears 'em out fast, she does. But you are not going to leave us yet, sir?"

"I know not how soon it may be, Margery: very long it cannot be. Sit down."

She stood yet, however, looking at him, disregarding the bench to which he had pointed; stood with a saddened expression and compressed lips. Margery's was an experienced eye, and it may be that she saw the shadow which had taken up its abode in his face.

"You be going to see my old master and mistress, sir," she burst forth, dashing some rebellious moisture from her eyes. "Mr. Thomas, do you recollect it?—my poor mistress sat here in this porch the very day she died."

"I remember it well, Margery. I am dying quietly, thank God, as my mother died."

"And what a blessing it is when folks can die quietly, with their conscience and all about 'em at peace!" ejaculated Margery. "I wonder how Mr. George 'ud have took it, if *he'd* been called instead o' you, sir?"

There was considerable acrimony, not to say sarcasm in the remark ; perhaps not altogether suitable to the scene and interview. Good Thomas Godolphin would not see it or appear to have noticed it. He took Margery's hands in his.

"I never thought once that I should die leaving you in debt, Margery," he said, his earnest tone bearing its own emotion. "It was always my intention to bequeath you an annuity that would have kept you from want in your old age. But it has been decreed otherwise ; and it is of no use to speak of what might have been. Miss Janet will refund to you by degrees what you have lost in the bank ; and so long as you live you will be welcome to a home with her. She has not much, but——"

"Now never fash yourself about me, Mr. Thomas," interrupted Margery. "I shall do well, I dare say : I'm young enough yet for work, I hope ; I shan't starve. Ah, this world's nothing but a peck o' troubles," she added, with a loud sigh. "You'll find that, sir, when you've left it : and it's a happy thing for them as can learn as much afore they go."

"The troubles have nearly passed for me," he said, a smile illumining his wan and wasted features.

"It's to be hoped they have, sir. But you were always one to think and care for others : and it is by such that troubles stand the longest and are felt the deepest. If one didn't learn with one's mother's milk, as it were, that all God does is for the best, one might be tempted to wonder why He lets 'em come to such as you. This world has had its share of sorrow for you, Mr. Thomas."

"I am on the threshold of a better, Margery," was his quiet answer : "one where sorrow cannot enter."

Margery sat for some little time on the bench, talking to him. They had gone back in thought to old times, to the illness and death of Mrs. Godolphin, to the long-gone scenes of the past, whether of pleasure or of pain: a past which for us all seems to bear a charm when recalled to the memory, which it had never borne when present. At length Margery rose to depart, declining the invitation to enter the house or to see the ladies, and Thomas said to her his last farewell.

“My late missis, I remember, looked once or twice during her illness as grey as he do,” she cogitated with herself as she went along. “But it strikes me that with him it’s death. I’ve a great mind to ask old Snow what he thinks. If it is so, Mr. George ought to be telegraphed for: they *be* brothers, after all.”

Margery made her way direct to the house of Mr. Snow. Mr. Snow was absent; but Mr. Snow’s boy was keeping the surgery, and by way of doing it agreeably, was standing on his head on the counter.

“Now then!” cried Margery, in the sharpest accent, “is that how you attend to the place in your master’s absence? Where is he?”

The boy had scuttered to his feet on the floor, very much relieved when he saw the intruder was only Margery. “He’s caught up into the moon,” cried he, impudently.

“I’ll catch you, if you don’t behave yourself,” rebuked Margery. “You tell me where your master is.”

“If he ain’t there, he’s elsewhere,” retorted the bold boy. “This here surgery haven’t seen the colour of his skin since morning.”

Giving the boy a smart box on the ear to remind him of her visit, Margery went out again. About half way home she encountered Mr. Snow. He was coming

along on the run, and would have passed Margery, but she arrested him.

“There’s no bumbailie after you, is there?” cried she, in her free manners. “Can’t you stop a minute, sir?”

“I’ve been a few miles up the line and have got back late; the train was twenty minutes behind its time. What is it, Margery woman?”

“Well, I want to know your opinion of Mr. Godolphin, sir. I have just been up to see him, and I don’t like his look.”

“Does he look worse than usual?”

“If I am not mistaken he looks as he have never looked yet; as folks can look but once in their lives—and that’s right afore death,” returned Margery. “When shall you see him, sir?”

“This evening if I possibly can. Not that anything can be done for him: as we all know too well.”

“I’d like to ask you another question, sir, now we are by ourselves,” resumed Margery, laying hold of his coat-tails lest he should evade her. “What’s your true opinion of my mistress?”

“I don’t know; I haven’t got one,” replied Mr. Snow, too impulsively for anything but truth. “Sometimes I think she’ll get over this weakness and do well; at others I am tempted to think—something else. Take as much care as you can of her.”

He shook his coat free and started off, running as before. Margery continued her way, which led her past the turning to the railway station. She cast an eye on the passengers coming from the train—who had not joined in the speed adopted by Mr. Snow—and in the last of them saw her master, Mr. George Godolphin.

Margery halted and rubbed her eyes, and almost

wondered whether it was a vision. Her mind had been busy with the question, should she, or should she not, telegraph for him; and there he was, before her view. Gay, handsome George! with his ever-distinguished entourage—I don't know a better word in English: his bearing, his attire, his person so essentially the gentleman; his pleasant face and his winning smile.

That smile was directed to Margery as he came up. He bore in his hand a small basket of wicker-work, its projecting top covered with delicate tissue paper. But for the bent of Margery's thoughts at the time, she would not have been particularly surprised at the sight of him, for Mr. George's visits to Prior's Ash were generally impromptu ones, paid without warning. She met him rather eagerly: speaking the impulse that had been in her mind—to send a message for him, on account of the state of his brother.

“Is he worse?” asked George, eagerly.

“If ever I saw death writ in a face, it's writ in his, sir,” returned Margery.

George considered a moment. “I think I will go up to Ashlydyat without loss of time then,” he said, turning back. But he stopped to give the basket into Margery's hands.

“It is for your mistress, Margery. How is she?”

“*She's* nothing to boast of,” replied Margery, in a tone and with a stress that might have awakened George's suspicions, had any fears with reference to his wife's state yet penetrated his mind. But they had not. “I wish I could see her get a little bit o' life into her, and then the health might be the next thing to come,” concluded Margery.

“Tell her I shall soon be home.” And George Godolphin proceeded to Ashlydyat.

It may be that he had not the faculty of distinguishing the different indications that a countenance gives forth, or it may be that to find his brother sitting in the porch disarmed his doubts, but certainly George saw no cause to endorse the fears expressed by Margery. She had entered into no details, and George had pictured, in his own mind, Thomas as in bed. To see him therefore sitting out of doors, quietly reading, certainly lulled all George's present fears.

Not but that the ravages in the worn form, the grey look in the pale face, struck him as that face was lifted to his; struck him almost with awe. For a few minutes their hands were locked together in silence. Generous Thomas Godolphin! Never since the proceedings had terminated, the daily details were over, had he breathed a word of the bankruptcy and its unhappiness to George.

"George, I am glad to see you. I have been wishing for you all day. I think you must have been sent on purpose."

"Margery sent me. I met her as I was coming from the train."

It was not to *Margery* that Thomas Godolphin had alluded—but he let it pass. "Sent on purpose," he repeated, aloud. "George, I think the end is very near."

"But you are surely better?" returned George, speaking in his impulse. "Unless you were better, would you be sitting here?"

"Do you remember, George, my mother sat here in the afternoon of the day she died? A feeling came over me to-day that I should enjoy a breath of the open air; but it was not until after they had brought my chair out and I was installed in it that I thought of my mother. It struck me as being a curious coincidence;

almost an omen. Margery recollected the circumstance, and spoke of it."

The words imparted a strange sensation to George, a shivering dread. "Are you in much pain, Thomas?" he asked.

"Not much; a little, at times; but the great agony that used to come upon me has quite passed. As it did with my mother, you know."

Could George Godolphin help the feeling of bitter contrition that came over him? He had been less than man, lower than human, had he helped it. Perhaps the full self-reproach of his conduct never came home to him as it came now. With all his faults, his lightness, he loved his brother: and it seemed that it was he—he—who had made the face wan, the hair grey, who had broken the already sufficiently-stricken heart, and had sent him to his grave before his time.

"It is my fault," he spoke in his emotion. "But for me, Thomas, you might have been with us, at any rate another year or two. The trouble has told upon you."

"Yes, it has told upon me," Thomas quietly answered. There was nothing else that he could answer.

"Don't think of it, Thomas," was the imploring prayer. "It cannot be helped now."

"No, it cannot be helped," Thomas rejoined. But he did not add that, even now, it was disturbing his death-bed. "George," he said, pressing his brother's hands, "but that it seems so great an improbability, I would ask you to repay to our poor neighbours and friends what they have lost, should it ever be in your power. Who knows but you may be rich some time? You are young and capable, and the world is before you. If so, think of them: it is my last request to you."

“It would be my own wish to do it,” gravely answered George. “But do not think of it, Thomas; do not let it trouble you.”

“It does not trouble me much now. The thought of the wrong inflicted on them is ever present to me, but I am content to leave that, and all else, in the care of the all-potent, ever-merciful God. He can recompense better than I could, even had I my energies and life left to me.”

There was a pause. George loosed his brother's hands and took the seat on the bench, where Margery had sat; the very seat where he had once sat with his two sticks, in his weakness, years before, when the stranger, Mr. Appleby, came up and inquired for Mr. Verrall. Why or wherefore it should have come, George could not tell, but that day flashed over his memory now. Oh, the bitter remembrance! He had been a lightsome man then, without care, free from that depressing incubus that must, or that ought to, weigh down the soul—cruel wrong inflicted on his fellow-toilers in the great journey of life. And now? He had brought the evil of poverty upon himself, the taint of disgrace upon his name; he had driven his sisters from their home; had sent that fair and proud inheritance of the Godolphins, Ashlydyat, into the barter market; and had hastened the passage of his brother to the grave. Ay! dash your bright hair from your brow as you will, George Godolphin!—pass your cambric handkerchief over your heated face!—you cannot dash away the remembrance. You have done all this, and the consciousness is very present to you.

Thomas Godolphin interrupted his reflections, bending towards George his wasted features. “George, what are your prospects?”

“I have tried to get into something or other in London, but my trying has been useless. All the places that are worth having are so snapped up. I have been offered a post in Calcutta, and I think I shall accept it. If I find that Maria has no objection to go out, I shall: I came down to-day to talk it over with her.”

“Is it through Lord Averil?”

“Yes. He wrote to me yesterday morning before he went to church with Cecil. I got the letter by the evening mail, and came off this morning.”

“And what is the appointment? Is it in the civil service?”

“Nothing so grand—in sound, at any rate. It’s only mercantile. The situation is at an indigo merchant’s, or planter’s; I am not sure which. But it’s a good appointment; one that a gentleman may accept; and the pay is liberal. Lord Averil urges it upon me—these merchants, they are brothers, are friends of his. If I decline it, he will try for a civil appointment for me; but to obtain one might take a considerable time: and there might be other difficulties.”

“Yes,” said Thomas, shortly. “By what little I can judge, this appears to me to be eligible, just what will suit you.”

“I think so. If I accept it, I shall have to start with the new year. I saw the agents of the house in town this morning, and they tell me it is quite a first-class appointment for a mercantile one. I hope Maria will not dislike to go.”

They sat there conversing until the sun had set. George pointed out to his brother’s notice that the air was getting cold, but Thomas only smiled in answer: it was not the night air, hot or cold, that could any longer

affect Thomas Godolphin. But he said that he might as well go in, and took George's arm to help his feeble steps.

"Is no one at home?" inquired George, finding the usual sitting-room empty.

"They are at Lady Godolphin's," replied Thomas, alluding to his sisters. "Bessy goes there for good next week, and certain arrangements have to be made, so they walked over this afternoon just before you came up."

George sat down. The finding his sisters absent was a relief: since the unhappy explosion, George had always felt as a guilty schoolboy in the presence of Janet. He remained a short while, and then rose to depart. "I'll come up and see you in the morning, Thomas."

Was there any prevision of what the night would bring forth on the mind of Thomas Godolphin? It might be. He entwined in his the hands held out to him.

"God bless you, George! God bless you, and keep you always!" And a lump, not at all familiar to George Godolphin's throat, rose in it as he went out from the presence of his brother.

CHAPTER XV.

FOR THE LAST TIME; VERY FAINT.

It was one of those charmingly clear nights that bring a sensation of tranquillity to the senses. Daylight could not be said to have quite faded, but the moon was up, its rays shining brighter and brighter with every departing moment of day. As George passed Lady Godolphin's Folly, Janet was coming from it.

He could not avoid her. I don't say he wished to do it, but he could not if he had wished it. They stood talking together for some time; on Thomas's state; on this Calcutta prospect of George's, for Janet had heard something of it from Lord Averil, and she questioned him closely; on other subjects. It was growing quite night when Janet made a movement homewards, and George could do no less than attend her.

"I thought Bessy was with you," he remarked, as they walked along.

"She is remaining an hour or two longer with Lady Godolphin; but it was time I came home to Thomas. When do you say you must sail, George?"

"The beginning of the year. My salary will commence with the first of January, and I ought to be off that day. I don't know whether that will give Maria sufficient time for preparation."

“Sufficient time!” repeated Miss Godolphin. “Will she be wanting to take out a ship’s cargo? I should think she might be ready in a tithe of it. Shall you take the child?”

“Oh yes,” he hastily answered; “I could not go without the child. And I am sure Maria would not consent to be separated from her. I hope Maria will not object to going on her own score.”

“Nonsense!” returned Janet. “She will have the sense to see that it is a remarkable piece of good fortune, far better than you had any right to expect. Let me recommend you to put by half the salary, George. It is a very handsome one, and you may do it if you will. Take a lesson from the past.”

“Yes,” replied George, with a twitch of conscience. “I wonder if the climate will try Maria?”

“I judge that the change will be good for her in all ways,” said Janet, emphatically. “Depend upon it she will only be too thankful to turn her back on Prior’s Ash. She’ll not get strong as long as she stops in it, or so long as your prospects are uncertain, doing nothing as you are now. *I* can’t make out, for my part, how you live.”

“You might easily guess that I have been helped a little, Janet.”

“By one that *I* would not be helped by if I were starving,” severely rejoined Janet. “You allude, I presume, to Mr. Verrall?”

George did allude to Mr. Verrall; but he avoided a direct answer. “All that I borrow I shall return,” he said, “as soon as it is in my power to do so. It is not much: and it is given and received as a loan only. What do you think of Thomas?” he asked, willing to change the subject.

“I think——” Janet stopped. Her voice died away into an awe-struck whisper, and finally ceased. They had taken the path home round by the ash-trees. The Dark Plain lay stretched before them, clear and shadowy (but that must seem a contradiction) in the moonlight. In the brightest night the gorse-bushes, with their shade, gave the place a shadowy weird-like appearance, but never had the moonlight on the plain been clearer, whiter, brighter than it was now. And the Shadow?

The ominous Shadow of Ashlydyat lay there: the Shadow which had clung to the fortunes of the Godolphins, as tradition said, in past ages; which had certainly followed the present race. But the dark blackness that had characterised it was unobservable now: the Shadow was undoubtedly there, but had eyes been looking on it less accustomed to its form than were Miss Godolphin's, they might have failed to make out distinctly its outlines. It was of a light, faint hue; more as the shadow of the Shadow, if it may be so expressed.

“George! do you notice?” she breathed.

“I see it,” he answered.

“But do you notice its peculiarity—its faint appearance? I should say—I should say that it is indeed going from us; that it must be about the last time it will follow the Godolphins. With the wresting from them of Ashlydyat the curse was to spend itself.”

She had sat down on the bench underneath the ash-trees, and was speaking in a low, dreamy tone: but George heard every word, and the topic was not particularly palatable to him. He could not but remember that it was he and no other who had been the cause of the wresting from them of Ashlydyat.

“Your brother will not be here long,” murmured Janet. “That’s the warning for the last chief of the Godolphins.”

“Oh, Janet! I wish you were not so superstitious! Of course we know—it is patent to us all—that Thomas cannot last long: a few days, a few hours even, may close his life. Why should you connect with him that wretched Shadow?”

“I know what I know, and I have seen what I have seen,” was the reply of Janet, spoken slowly; nay, solemnly. “It is no wonder that *you* wish to ignore it, to affect to disbelieve in it: but you can do neither the one nor the other, George Godolphin.”

George gave no answering argument. It may be that he felt he had forfeited the right to argue with Janet. She again broke the silence.

“I have watched and watched; but never once, since the day that those horrible misfortunes fell, has that Shadow appeared. I thought it had gone for good; I thought that our ruin, that the passing of Ashlydyat into the possession of strangers, was the working out of the curse. But it seems it has come again; for the last, final time, as I believe. And it is but in accordance with the past, that the type of the curse should come to shadow forth the death of the last Godolphin.”

“You are complimentary to me, Janet,” cried George, good-humouredly. “When poor Thomas shall have gone, I shall be here still, the last of the Godolphins.”

“*You!*” returned Janet, and her tone of scornful contempt, unconscious as she might herself be of it, brought a sting to George’s mind, a flush to his brow. “You might be worthy of the name of Godolphin once,

laddie, but that's over. The last true Godolphin dies out with Thomas."

"How long are you going to sit here?" asked George, after a time, as she gave no signs of moving.

"You need not wait," returned Janet. "I am at home now, as may be said. Don't stay, George: I would rather you did not: your wife must be expecting you."

Glad enough to be released, George went on his way, and Janet sat on, alone. With that Shadow before her—though no longer a dark one—it was impossible but that her reflections should be turned back on the unhappy past. She lost herself in a maze of perplexity—as all must do, whose thoughts roam to things "beyond their ken." Why should this fate have overtaken the Godolphin family—the precise fate predicted for it ages ago? Why should that strange and never-to-be-accounted-for Shadow appear on the eve of evil? *Could they not have gone from their fate?*—not have escaped it by any means? It seemed but a trifling thing to do for George Godolphin, to keep in the right path, instead of lapsing to the wrong one: it seemed a more trifling thing still for Sir George Godolphin to do—to quit his inheritance, Ashlydyat, for the Folly; yet upon that pivot events seemed to have turned. As it had been foretold (so ran the prediction) ages before: When the chief of Ashlydyat should quit Ashlydyat, the ruin of the Godolphins would be near. And it had proved so. "Eh me!" wailed out Janet, in her sore anguish, "we are blaming George for it all, but perhaps the lad could not go against the fate. Who knows?"

Who knew, indeed! Let us look back to some of the ruin we have witnessed; and marvel, as Janet Godolphin did, whether those whom we blame as its

cause, *could* have “gone against their fate.” There are mysteries in this world which we cannot solve: we may lose ourselves as we will in their depths,—we may cast ridicule on them, or pass them over with a light laugh of irony,—we may talk, in our poor inflated wisdom, of their being amenable to common laws, to be accounted for by ordinary rules of science,—but we can never solve them; never fathom them, until Time shall be no more.

A great deal of this story, *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, is a perfectly true one; it is but the recital of a drama of real life. And the superstition that encompasses it? ten thousand inquisitive tongues will ask. Yes, and the superstition. There are things, as I have just said, which can neither be explained nor accounted for: they are marvels, mysteries, and so they must remain. Many a family has its supernatural skeleton, religiously believed in; many a house has its one dread corner which has never been fully unclosed to the bright light of day. Say what men will to the contrary, there is a tendency in the human mind to court the in-creeping of superstition. We cannot shut our eyes to things that occur within our view, although we may be, and always shall be, utterly unable to explain them; what they are, where they spring from, why they come. If I were to tell you that I believe there are such things as omens, warnings, which come to us—though seldom are they sufficiently marked at the time to be attended to—I should be set down as a visionary day-dreamer. I am nothing of the sort. I have my share of plain common sense: I pass my time in working, not in dreaming: I never had the gratification of seeing a ghost yet, and I wish I was as sure of a thousand pounds' *cadeau* coming to me this moment, as I am that

I never shall see one; I have not been taken into favour by the spirits, have never been promoted to so much as half a message from them—and never expect to be. But some curious incidents have forced themselves on my life's experience, causing me to echo as a question the assertion of the Prince of Denmark—Are there more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy?

Janet Godolphin rose with a deep sigh and her weight of care. She kept her head turned to the Shadow until she had passed from its view, and then continued her way to the house, murmuring, "It's but a little misfortune; it's but a little misfortune: the shade is not much darker than the moonlight itself."

Thomas was in his arm-chair, bending forward towards the fire, as she entered. His face would have been utterly colourless, save for the bluish tinge which had settled there, a tinge distinguishable even in the red blaze. Janet, keen-sighted as Margery, thought the hue had grown more ominous since she quitted him in the afternoon.

"Have you come back alone?" asked Thomas, turning towards her.

"George accompanied me as far as the ash-trees: I met him. Bessy is staying on for an hour with Lady Godolphin. Have you had your medicine, Thomas?"

"Yes."

Janet drew a chair near to him and sat down, glancing almost stealthily at him. When this ominous look appears on the human face, we do not like to gaze into it too boldly, lest its owner, so soon to be called away, may read the fiat in our own dread countenance. Janet need not have feared its effect, had he done so, on Thomas Godolphin.

“It is a fine night,” he observed

“It is,” replied Janet. “Thomas,” dropping her voice, “the Shadow is abroad.”

“Ah!”

The response was spoken in no tone of dread, of dismay ; but calmly, pleasantly, with a smile upon his lips.

“It has changed its colour,” continued Janet, “and may be called grey now instead of black. I thought it had left us for good, Thomas : I suppose it had to come once more.”

“If it cared to keep up its character for consistency,” he said, his voice a jesting one. “If it has been the advance herald of the death of other Godolphins, why should it not herald in mine?”

“I did not think to hear you joke about the Shadow,” observed Janet, after a pause of vexation.

“Nay, there’s no harm. I have never understood it, you know, Janet ; none of us have : so little have we understood, that we have not known whether to believe or disbelieve. A short while, Janet, and things may be made plainer to me.”

“How are you feeling to-night?” somewhat abruptly asked Janet.

“Never better of late days. It seems as if ease both of mind and body had come to me. I think,” he added, after a few moments’ reflection, “that what George tells me of a prospect opening for him has imparted this sense of ease. I have thought of him a great deal, Janet ; of his wife and child : of what would become of him and of them.”

“And it has been troubling you, I conclude !” remarked Janet, with a touch of her old grave accent. “He is not worth it, Thomas.”

“May God help him on now!” murmured Thomas Godolphin. “He may live yet to be a comfort to his family; to repair to others some of the injury he has caused. Oh Janet! I am ready to go.”

Janet turned her eyes from the fire that the tears rising in them might not be seen to glisten. “The Shadow was very light, Thomas,” she repeated. “Whatever it may herald forth, will not be much of a misfortune.”

“A misfortune!—to be taken to my rest!—to the good God who has so loved and kept me here! A few minutes before you came in, I fell into a doze, and I dreamt I saw Jesus Christ standing there, by the window, waiting for me. He had his hand stretched out to me with a smile. So vivid had been the impression, that when I woke I thought it was reality, and I got up and was hastening towards the window before I recollected myself. Death a misfortune! No, Janet; not for me. Not but that I wait with awe, as all must, the solemn change.”

Janet rang the bell for lights to be brought in. Thomas, his elbow resting on the arm of the chair, bent his head upon his hand, and became lost in the imagination of glories that might so soon open to him. Bright forms were flitting around a throne of wondrous beauty, golden harps in their hands; and in one of them, her harp idle, her radiant face turned as if watching for one who might be coming, he seemed to recognise Ethel.

A misfortune for the good to die! No, no.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BELL THAT RANG OUT ON THE EVENING AIR.

GEORGE GODOLPHIN sat with his wife and child. The room was bright with light and fire, and George's spirits were bright in accordance with it. He had been enlarging upon the prospect offered to him, describing a life in India in vivid colours; had drawn some imaginative pen-and-ink sketches of Miss Meta on a camel's back; in a gorgeous palanquin; in an open terrace-gallery, being fanned by about fifty slaves: the young lady herself looking on at the pictures in a high state of excitement, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks burning. Maria seemed to be partaking of the general hilarity; whether she was really better, or the unexpected return of her husband had infused into her artificial strength, unwonted excitement, certain it is that she was not looking very ill that night: her cheeks had borrowed some of Meta's colour, and her lips were parted with a smile at George's words, or at Meta's ecstasies. The child's tongue was never still; it was papa this, papa the other, incessantly. Margery felt rather cross, and when she came in to add some dish to the substantial tea she had prepared for her master, told him she hoped he'd not be for carry-

ing Miss Meta out to them wretched foreign places that was only good for convicts. India and Botany Bay ranked precisely alike in the estimation of Margery.

But the tea was done with and removed, and the evening had gone on, and Margery had come again to escort Miss Meta to bed. Miss Meta was not in a hurry to be escorted. Her nimble feet were flying everywhere: from papa at the table, to mamma who sat on the sofa near the fire; from mamma to Margery, standing silent and grim, scarcely deigning to look at the pen-and-ink sketches that Meta exhibited to her.

"I don't see no sense in 'em, for my part," slightly spoke Margery, regarding with dubious eyes one somewhat indistinct representation held up to her. "Them things bain't like Christian animals. A elephant, d'ye call it? Which is its head and which is its tail?"

Meta whisked off to her papa, elephant in hand. "Papa, which is its head, and which is its tail?"

"That's its tail," said George. "You'll know its head from its tail when you come to ride one, Margery," cried he, throwing his laughing glance at the woman.

"Me ride a elephant! me mount upon one o' them beasts!" was the indignant response. "I'd like to see myself at it! It might be just as well, sir, if you didn't talk about 'em to the child: I shall have her start out of her sleep, screaming, to-night, fancying that a score of 'em's eating her up."

George laughed. Meta's busy brain was at work; very busy, very blithesome just then.

"Papa, do we have swings in India?"

"Lots of them," responded George.

“Do they go up to the trees? Are they as good as the one Mrs. Pain had made for me at the Folly?”

“Ten times better than that,” said George, slightly. “That was a muff of a swing, compared to what the others will be.”

Meta considered. “You didn’t see it papa. “It went up—up—oh, ever so high.”

“Did it?” said George. “We’ll send the others higher.”

“Who’ll swing me?” continued Meta. “Mrs. Pain? She had used to swing me before. Will she go to India with us?”

“Not she,” said George. “What should she go for? Look here. Here’s Meta on an elephant, and Margery on another, in attendance behind.”

He had been mischievously sketching it off: Meta, sitting at her ease on the elephant, her dainty little legs astride, boy fashion, was rather a pretty sight: but poor Margery grasping hold of the animal’s body and trunk, her face one picture of horror in her fear of falling, and some half-dozen natives propping her up on either side, was only a ludicrous one.

Margery looked daggers, but nothing could exceed the delight of Meta. “Draw mamma upon one, papa; make her elephant alongside me.”

“Draw mamma upon one?” repeated George. “I think we’ll have mamma in a palanquin; the elephants shall be reserved for you and Margery.”

“Is she coming to-bed to-night, or isn’t she?” demanded Margery, in an uncommonly sharp tone, speaking for the benefit of the company generally, not to anybody in particular.

Meta paid little attention; George appeared to pay less. In taking his knife from his waistcoat-pocket to

cut the pencil, preparatory to "drawing mamma and the palanquin," he happened to bring forth a ring. Those quick little eyes saw it; they saw most things. "That's Uncle Thomas's!" cried the child.

In his somewhat hasty essay to return it to his pocket, George let the ring fall to the ground, and it rolled towards Margery. She picked it up, wonderingly—almost fearfully; she had believed that Mr. Godolphin would not part with his signet-ring during life: the ring which he had offered to the bankruptcy commissioners, and they, with every token of respect, had returned to him.

"Oh, master! Surely he is not dead!"

"Dead!" echoed George, looking at her in surprise. "I left him better than usual, Margery, when I came away."

Margery said no more. Meta was not so scrupulous. "Uncle Thomas always has that on his finger: he seals his letters with it. Why have you brought it away, papa?"

"He does not want it to seal letters with any longer, Meta," George answered, speaking gravely now, and stroking her golden curls. "I shall use it in future for sealing mine."

"Who'll wear it?" asked Meta. "You, or Uncle Thomas?"

"I shall—some time. But it is quite time Meta was in bed; and Margery looks as if she thought so. There! just a few of mamma's grapes, and away to dream of elephants."

Some fine white grapes were heaped up on a plate on the table: they were what George had brought from London for his wife. He broke some off for Meta, and that spoiled young damsel climbed on his knee while she devoured them, chattering incessantly.

“Will there be parrots in India? Red ones?”

“Plenty. Red and green and blue and yellow,” returned George, who was rather magnificent in his promises. “There’ll be monkeys as well—as Margery’s fond of them.”

Margery flung herself off in a temper. But the words had brought a recollection to Meta: she scuffled up on her knees, neglecting her grapes, gazing at her papa in consternation.

“Uncle Reginald was to bring me home some monkeys and some parrots and a Chinese dog that won’t bite: how shall I have them, papa, if I’m gone to Cal—what is it?” She spoke better than she did, and could sound the “th” now; but the name of the Hindostan presidency was difficult to be remembered.

“Calcutta. We’ll write word to Regy’s ship to come round there and leave them,” replied ready George.

It satisfied the child. She finished her grapes, and then George took her in his arms to Maria to be kissed, and afterwards put her down outside the door to offended Margery, after kissing lovingly her pretty lips and her golden curls.

His manner had changed when he returned. He stood at the fire, near Maria, grave and earnest, and began talking more seriously to her on this new project than he had done in the presence of the child.

“I think I should do wrong were I to refuse it: do not you, Maria? It is an offer that is not often met with.”

“Yes, I think you would do wrong to refuse it. It is far better than anything I had hoped for.”

“And can you be ready to start by New Year’s-day?”

“I—I could be ready, of course,” she answered.

“But I—I—don’t know whether——”

She came to a final stop. George looked at her in

surprise: in addition to her hesitation, he detected considerable emotion.

She stood up by him and leaned her arm on the mantelpiece. She strove to speak quietly, to choke down the rebellious rising in her throat: her breath went and came, her bosom was heaving. "George, I am not sure whether I shall be able to undertake the voyage. I am not sure that I shall live to go."

Did his heart beat a shade quicker? He looked at her, more in surprise still than in any other feeling. He had not in the least realised this faint suggestion of the future.

"My darling, what do you mean?"

He had passed his arm round her waist and drawn her to him. Maria let her head fall upon his shoulder, and the tears began to trickle down her wasted cheeks.

"I cannot get strong, George. I get weaker instead of stronger; and I begin to think I shall never be well again. I begin to know that I shall never be well again!" she added, amending the words: "I have thought it some time."

"How do you feel?" he asked, breaking the silence that had ensued. "Are you in any pain?"

"I have had a pain in my throat ever since the—ever since the summer; and I have a constant inward pain here"—touching her chest. "Mr. Snow says both arise from the same cause—nervousness; but I don't know."

"Maria," he said, his voice quite trembling with its tenderness, "shall I tell you what it is? The worry of the past summer has had a bad effect upon you and brought you into this low, weak state. Mr. Snow is right: it is nervousness: and you must have change of scene ere you can recover. Is he attending you?"

“He calls every other day or so, and he sends me medicine of different kinds; tonics, I fancy. I wish I could get strong! I might—perhaps—get a little better, that is, I might feel a trifle better, if I were not always so entirely alone. I wish,” she more timidly added, “that you could be with me more than you are.”

“You cannot wish it so heartily as I,” returned George. “A little while, my darling, and things will be bright again. I have been earnestly and constantly seeking for something to do in London, and was obliged to be there. Now that I have this place given me, I must be there still chiefly until we sail, making my preparations. You can come to me if you like, until we do go,” he added, “if you would rather be there than here. I can change my bachelor lodgings, and get a place large enough for you and Meta.”

She felt that she was not equal to the removal, and she felt that if she really were to leave Europe she must remain this short intervening time near her father and mother. But—even as she thought it—the conviction came upon her, firm and strong, that she never should leave it; should not live to leave it. George’s voice, eager and hopeful, interrupted.

“We shall begin life anew in India, Maria: with the old country we shall quit old sores. As to Margery—I don’t know what’s to be done about her. It would half break her heart to drag her to a new land, and quite break it to carry off Meta from her. Perhaps we had better not attempt to influence her either way, but let the decision rest entirely with her.”

“She will never face the live elephants,” said Maria, her lips smiling at the joke, as she endeavoured to be gay and hopeful as George was. But the effort utterly failed. A vision came over her of George there *alone* ;

herself in the cold grave, whither she believed she was surely hastening; Meta—ay, what of Meta?

“Oh, George! if I might but get strong! if I might but live to go!” she cried, in a wail of agony.

“Hush, hush! Maria, hush! I must not scold you; but indeed it is not right to give way to these low spirits. That of itself will keep you back. Shall I take you to town with me now, to-morrow, just for a week’s change? I know it would partially bring you round, and we’d make shift in my rooms for the time. Margery will take care of Meta here.”

She knew how worse than useless was the thought of attempting it; she saw that George could not be brought to understand her excessive weakness. A faint hope came across her that, now that the uncertainty of his future prospects was removed, she might grow better. That uncertainty had been distressing her sick heart for months.

She subdued her emotion and sat down in the chair quietly, saying that she was not strong enough to go up with him this time: it would be a change in one sense for her, she added, the thinking of the new life; and then she began to talk of other things.

“Did you see Reginald before he sailed?”

“Not immediately before it, I think.”

“You are aware that he has gone as common seaman?”

“Yes. By-the-way, there’s no knowing what I may be able to do for Regy out there. And for Isaac too, perhaps. Once I am in a good position I shall be able to assist them—and I’ll do it. Regy hates the sea: I’ll get him something more to his taste in Calcutta.”

Maria’s face flushed with hope, and she clasped her nervous hands together. “If you could, George! how

thankful I should be! I think of poor Regy and his hard life night and day."

"Which is not good for you by any means, young lady. I wish you'd get out of that habit of thinking and fretting about others. It has been just poor Thomas's fault."

She answered by a faint smile. "Has Thomas given you his ring?" she asked.

"He gave it me this afternoon," replied George, taking it from his pocket. It was a ring with a bright green stone, on which was engraved the arms of the Godolphins. Sir George had worn it always, and it came to Thomas at his death: now it had come to George.

"You do not wear it, George."

"Not yet. I cannot bear to put it on my finger while Thomas lives. In point of fact, I have no right to do so—at least to use the signet: it pertains exclusively to the head of the Godolphins."

"Do you see Mrs. Pain often?" Maria presently said, with apparent indifference. But George little knew the fluttering emotion that had been working within, or the effort it had taken to subdue that emotion ere the question could be put.

"I see her sometimes; not often. She gets me to ride with her in the Park now and then."

"Does she intend to continue to reside with the Verralls?"

"I suppose so. I have not heard her mention anything about it."

"George, I have often wondered where Mrs. Pain's money comes from," Maria resumed, in a dreamy tone. "It was said in the old days, you know, that the report of her having thirty thousand pounds' fortune was false; that she had none."

“I don’t believe she had a penny,” returned George. “As to her income, I fancy it is drawn from Verrall. Mrs. Pain’s husband was connected in some business way with Verrall, and perhaps she still benefits. I know nothing whatever, but I have thought it must be so. Hark! Listen!”

George raised his hand as he abruptly spoke, for a distant sound had broken upon his ear. Springing to the window he threw it open. The death-bell of All Souls’ was booming out over Prior’s Ash.

Before a word was spoken by him or by his wife; before George could still the emotion that was thumping at his heart, Margery came in with a scared face: in her flurry, her sudden grief, she addressed him as she had been accustomed to address him in his boyhood.

“Do you hear it, Master George? That’s the passing-bell! It is for *him*. There’s nobody else within ten miles that they’d trouble to have the bell tolled for at nigh ten o’clock at night. The master of Ashlydyat’s gone.”

She sat down on a chair, regardless of the presence of her master and mistress, and flinging her apron over her face, burst into a storm of sobs.

A voice in the passage outside aroused her, for she recognised it as Bexley’s. George opened the room-door, and the old man came in.

“It is all over, sir,” he said, his manner strangely still, his voice unnaturally calm and low, as is sometimes the case where emotion is striven to be suppressed. “Miss Janet bade me come to you with the tidings.”

George’s bearing was suspiciously quiet too. “It is very sudden, Bexley,” he presently rejoined.

Maria had risen and stood with one hand leaning on the table, her eyes strained on Bexley, her white face turned to him. Margery never moved.

“Very sudden, sir: and yet my mistress did not seem unprepared for it. He took his tea with her, and was so cheerful and well over it, that I declare I began to hope he had taken a fresh turn. Soon afterwards Miss Bessy came back, and I heard her laughing in the room as she told them some story that had been related to her by Lady Godolphin. Presently my mistress called me in, to give me directions about a little matter she wanted done to-morrow, and while she was speaking to me, Miss Bessy cried out. We turned round and saw her leaning over my master. He had slipped back in his chair powerless, and I hastened to raise and support him. Death was in his face, sir; there was no mistaking it; but he was quite conscious, quite sensible, and smiled at us. ‘I must say farewell to you,’ he said, and Miss Bessy burst into a fit of sobs; but my mistress kneeled down quietly before him, and took his hands in hers, and said, ‘Thomas, is the moment come?’ ‘Yes, it is come,’ he answered, and he tried to look round at Miss Bessy, who stood a little behind his chair. ‘Don’t grieve,’ he said, ‘I am going on first;’ but she only sobbed the more. ‘Good-bye, my dear ones,’ he continued; ‘good-bye, Bexley; I shall wait for you all, as I know I am being waited for. Fear?’ he went on, for Miss Bessy sobbed out something that sounded like the word, ‘fear, when I am going to God! —when I saw Jesus——’”

Bexley fairly broke down with a great burst, and the tears were rolling silently over Maria’s cheeks. George wheeled round to the window and stood there with his back to them. Presently Bexley mastered himself and resumed: Margery had come forward then and taken her apron from before her eyes.

“It was the last word he spoke—‘Jesus.’ His voice

ceased, his hands fell, and the eyelids dropped. There was no struggle; nothing but a long gentle breath; and he died with the smile upon his lips."

"He had cause to smile," interjected Margery, the words coming from her in jerks. "If ever a man has gone to his rest in heaven, it is Mr. Godolphin. He had more than his share of sorrow in this world, and God has took him to a better."

Every feeling in George's heart echoed to the words,—every pulse beat in wild sorrow for the death of his good brother,—every sting that remorse could bring pricked him with the consciousness of his own share in it. He thrust his burning face beyond the window into the cool night; he raised his eyes to the blue canopy of heaven, serene and fair in the moonlight, almost as if he saw in imagination the redeemed soul winging its flight thither. He pressed his hands upon his throbbing breast to still its emotion; but for the greatest exercise of self-control he would have burst into sobs, as Bexley had done; and it may be that he—he, careless George Godolphin—breathed forth a yearning cry to heaven to be pardoned his share of the past. If Thomas, in his changed condition, could look down upon him, now, with his loving eyes, his ever-forgiving spirit, he would know how bitter and genuine, how full of anguish, were these regrets!

George leaned his head on the side of the window to subdue his emotion, to gather the outward calmness that man likes not to have ruffled before the world; he listened to the strokes of the passing-bell, ringing out so sharply in the still night air: and every separate stroke was laden with its weight of pain.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHUTTERS CLOSED AT PRIOR'S ASH.

YOU might have taken it to be Sunday in Prior's Ash—save that Sundays in ordinary do not look so gloomy. The shops were shut, a drizzling rain came down, and the heavy bell of All Souls' was booming out at solemn intervals. It was tolling for the funeral of Thomas Godolphin. Morning and night, from eight o'clock to nine, had it so tolled since his death; but on this, the last day, it did not cease with nine o'clock but tolled on, and would so toll until he should be in his last home. People had closed their shutters with one accord as the clock struck ten; some indeed had never opened them at all: if they had not paid him due respect always in life, they paid it him in death. Ah, it was only for a time, in the first brunt of the shock, that Prior's Ash mistook Thomas Godolphin. He had gone to his long home; to his last resting-place: he had gone to the merciful God to whom (it may surely be said!) he had belonged in life; and Prior's Ash mourned for him.

You will deem this a sad story; perhaps bring a reproach upon me for recording such. That bell has tolled out all too often in its history; and this is not

the first funeral you have seen at All Souls'. If I wrote only according to my own experiences of life, my stories would be always sad ones. Life wears different aspects for us, and its cares and its joys are unequally allotted out. At least they so appear to be. One glances up heavily from the burdens heaped upon him, and sees others without care basking in the sunshine. But I often wonder whether those who seem so gay, whose path seems to be cast on the broad, sunshiny road of pleasure,—whether they have not a skeleton in *their* closet. I look, I say, and wonder, marvelling what the reality may be. Nothing but gaiety, nothing but lightness, nothing, to all appearance, but freedom from care. Is it really so? Perhaps; with some—a very few. Is it well for those few? A man, to whom God gave more than earthly wisdom, has said for our profit that sorrow is better than laughter; that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, and the living will lay it to his heart. The broad, sunshiny road of pleasure, down which so many seem to travel, is not the safest road to a longer home or the best preparation for it. Oh, if we could but see the truth when the burden upon us is heavy and long!—when we glance into the world at the light and free, and are tempted to wail out our rebellious complaint, “Lord, is it just that this should be laid upon me?—why cannot they, who seem to have only joy dealt out for their portion, help to bear their share of the burden?” Fellow-sufferers! if we could but read that burden aright, we should see how good it is, and bless the hand that sends it.

But we never can. We are but mortal; born with a mortal's keen susceptibility to care and pain. We preach to others, that these things are sent for their

good, we complaisantly say so to ourselves when not actually suffering; but when the fiery trial is upon us, then we groan out in our sore anguish that it is greater than we can bear.

There is no doubt that, with the many, suffering predominates in life, and if we would paint life as it is, that suffering must form a comprehensive view in the picture. Reverses, sickness, death—they seem to follow some people as surely as that the shadow follows the sun at noontide. It is probable; nay, it is certain; that minds are so constituted as to receive them differently. Witness, as a case in point, the contrast in Thomas Godolphin and his brother George. Thomas, looking back, could say that nearly his whole course of life had been marked by sorrow: some of its sources have been mentioned here: not all. There was the peculiarly melancholy death of Ethel; there was the long-felt disease which marked him for its early prey; there was the dreadful crash, the disgrace, which nearly broke his heart. It is true he felt these things more than many would have felt them—but I think it is to those who feel them most that sorrows chiefly come.

And George? Look at him. Gay, light, careless, handsome George. What sorrows had marked *his* path? None. He had revelled in the world's favour, he had made a wife of the woman he loved, he had altogether floated gaily down the sunniest part of the stream of life. The worry which his folly had brought upon himself, and which ended in his own ruin and in the ruin of so many others, *he* had not felt. No, he had scarcely felt it: and once let him turn his back on England and enter upon new scenes, he will barely remember it.

Yes, this is a sad story, and some of you, my readers,

may feel inclined to blame me, to say I might have made it merrier. According to your experiences, as they shall have lain on the sunny or the shady side of life, so will you judge it. How *true* it will be to some, let them tell. I could relate to you many of actual life far more sorrowful than this. But take courage; take courage, you who are well-nigh wearied out! Remember it is on earth's battle-field that heaven's crown is won.

All Souls' clock struck eleven, and the beadle came out of the church and threw wide the gates. It was very punctual, for there came the hearse in sight; punctual as he who was borne within it had in life always liked to be. Prior's Ash peeped out through the chinks of its shutters, behind its blinds and its curtains, to see the sight, as it came slowly winding along the street to the sound of the solemn bell. Through the mist of blinding tears which rolled down many a face did Prior's Ash look out. They might have attended him to the grave, following unobtrusively, but that it was known to be the wish of the family that such demonstration should not be made: so they contented themselves with shutting up their houses, and observing the day as one of mourning. "Bury me in the plainest and simplest manner possible," had been Thomas Godolphin's directions when the end was drawing near. Under the circumstances, it was only seemly to do so; but so antagonistic were pomp and show of all kinds to the tastes of Thomas Godolphin, in all things that related to himself, that it is more than probable the same orders would have been given had he died as his forefathers had died—the master of Ashlydyat, the wealthy chief of the Godolphins.

So a hearse and a mourning-coach were all that had

been commanded to Ashlydyat. What means, then, this pageantry of carriages that follow? Fine carriages, gay with colours, as they file past, one by one, the eyes of Prior's Ash strained on them, some with coronets on their panels, all with closed blinds, a long line of them. Lady Godolphin's is first, taking its place next the black mourning-coach. They have come from the various parts of the county, near and distant, to show their owners' homage to that good man who had earned their deepest respect during life. Willingly, willingly would those owners have attended and mourned him in person, but for the same motive which kept away the more humble inhabitants of Prior's Ash. Slowly the procession gained the churchyard-gate, and the hearse and the mourning-coach stopped at it: the rest of the carriages filed off and turned their horses' heads to face the churchyard, and waited still and quiet while the hearse was emptied. Out of the mourning-coach stepped two mourners only: George Godolphin and the Viscount Averil.

The rector of All Souls' stood at the gate in his surplice, book in hand. He turned, reciting the commencement of the service for the burial of the dead: "I am the resurrection and the life." With measured steps, slowly following, went those who bore the coffin, their heads covered with the velvet pall. George Godolphin and Lord Averil came next, their white handkerchiefs held to their faces, and behind them, having fallen in at the gate, was Bexley, with a man named Andrew, a time-honoured servant of Ashlydyat, but attached to Lady Godolphin's household now. Thus they entered the church.

Ere the rector reappeared again, book in hand still, but not reading from it, the churchyard had grown

pretty full. By ones, by twos, by threes, they had been coming in, regardless of the weather, to see the last of the master of Ashlydyat. The late staff of bank clerks had assembled, all of them in mourning. The beadle was lenient to-day. The beadle felt rather cowed down himself; for, one of the very few personages whom that self-important functionary had allowed himself to respect, because he could not help it, was Mr. Godolphin; and when a man feels his own spirit sad, he has no spirits to lord it over others. So the churchyard had filled, and the beadle had quietly allowed the innovation, and was publicly avowing to certain friends of his, within hearing, that he couldn't ha' felt more, had it been a son of his own, nor he did for Mr. Godolphin.

The rector of All Souls' took his place at the head of the grave and read the service, as the coffin was lowered. George stood next to him; close to George, Lord Averil; and the other mourners were clustered beyond. Their faces were bent; the drizzling rain beat down upon their bare heads. Many a creditor of the bank, who had suffered severely, had stolen up to take part thus silently in the ceremony. Perhaps they had done it in the light of a peace-offering—a sort of something that might rest soothingly upon their conscience; an atonement for the harsh words they had once lavished on Thomas Godolphin. Mr. Snow also had come up; unable to attend earlier, he came quietly now at the last, just as George had stolen up years before at the funeral of Ethel Grame. It was a notable contrast, the simple ceremony of to-day and the grand parade which had been made the last time a Godolphin was interred—Sir George. But the men, dead, were different, and circumstances had changed.

Did the rector of All Souls', standing there with his pale, severe face, his sonorous voice echoing over the graves, recall those back funerals, when he, over whom the service was now being read, had stood as chief mourner? No doubt he did. Did George recall them? The rector glanced at him once, and saw that he had a difficulty in suppressing his emotion. This was the first time he and George had met since the crash had come. How did George feel as he stood there, between the two men whom he had so wronged? Did he envy Thomas Godolphin in his coffin? *He* had escaped from the turmoil of the world's care and had gone to his rest. To his rest, if ever dead man had in this world.

"I heard a voice from Heaven, saying unto me, Write, From henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so saith the Spirit; for they rest from their labours."

So hushed was the silence, that every word, as it fell solemnly from the lips of the minister, might be heard in all parts of the churchyard. If ever that verse could apply to frail humanity, with its unceasing struggle after holiness and its unceasing failure *here*, it most surely applied to him over whom it was being spoken. How *did* George Godolphin feel? Surely it was an ordeal to him to stand there before those men whom he had injured, over the good brother whom he had helped to send to the grave! His head was bowed, his face hidden in his handkerchief; the drops of rain pattered down on his golden hair. He had gone to his grave so early! Bend forward, as so many of those spectators are doing, and read the inscription on the plate. There's a little earth on the coffin, but the plate is visible. "Thomas Godolphin of Ashlydyat: aged forty-five years."

Only forty-five years ! A period at which some men think they are but beginning life. It seemed to be an untimely death ; and it would have been, after all his pain and sorrow, but that he had entered upon a better life. Some of those, left to live on, might envy him now. Could they, in their thoughtful reflection, have wished, now that it was over, that one sorrow had been lightened for him, one pang removed ? No ; for God had but been fitting him for that other life ; and it is only those who have drunk here of their full cup of sorrow that are eager to enter upon it.

They left him in the vaulted grave, the last Godolphin of Ashlydyat, his coffin resting near his mother's, who lay beside Sir George. Was that vault destined to be opened shortly again ? In truth, it was little worth while to close it.

The spectators began to draw unobtrusively away, silently and decently. In the general crowd and bustle, for everybody seemed to be on the move, George turned suddenly to the rector and held out his hand. "Will you shake hands with me, Mr. Hastings ?"

There was a perceptible hesitation on the rector's part, not in the least sought to be disguised, ere he responded to it, and then he put his own hand into the one held out. "I cannot do otherwise over the dead body of your brother," was the answer. "But neither can I be a hypocrite, George Godolphin, and say that I forgive you, for it would not be true. The result of the injury you did me presses daily and hourly upon us in a hundred ways, and my mind as yet has refused to be brought into that charitable frame, necessary to entire forgiveness. This is not altogether the fault of my will. I wish to forgive you for your wife's sake and for my own ; I pray night and morning that I may be

enabled heartily to forgive you before I die. I would not be your enemy; I wish you well—and there's my hand in token of it: but to pronounce forgiveness is not yet in my power. Will you call in and see Mrs. Hastings?"

"I have not time to-day. I must go back to London this evening, but I shall be down again very shortly, and will see her then. It was a peaceful ending."

George was gazing down dreamily at the coffin as he spoke the last words. The rector looked at him.

"A peaceful ending! Yes. It could not be anything else with *him*."

"No, no," murmured George. "Not anything else with him."

"May God in His mercy send us all as happy a one, when our time shall come!"

As the words left the rector's lips, the loud and heavy bell boomed out again, giving notice to Prior's Ash that the last rites were over, that the world had closed for ever on Thomas Godolphin.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAUGHT BY MR. SNOW.

“OH, George! *can't* you stay with me!”

The words broke from Maria with a wail of anguish as she rose to bid her husband good-bye. He was hastening away to catch the evening train. It seemed that she had not liked to prefer the request before, had put it off to the last moment. In point of fact, she had seen but little of George all day. After the funeral he had returned in the coach with Lord Averil to Ashlydyat, and only came home late in the afternoon.

Lord and Lady Averil, recalled so suddenly from their wedding tour, had reached Ashlydyat the previous night, and would not leave it again. Janet was to depart from it in a few days; Bessy would be on the morrow with Lady Godolphin. It was the last time they, the brother and the two sisters, would be together—certainly for years, perhaps for ever; and George could not in decency hasten away. There were many things to say, various little personal mementoes of Thomas to be divided. Maria had been requested to spend that last day at Ashlydyat, and had promised; but in the morning she was attacked with faintness and sickness—as she had been two or three times lately—and was unable to leave her bed.

She grew better in the after-part of the day, and was up and looking herself again when George came home at dusk. Certainly her face was unusually pale; but, if George cast a thought to that paleness, it was only to suppose it the reflection of her new black dress and its crape trimming. "Have but one dress of deep mourning; I will pay for it," Janet had considerably said to her. "But mourning will be the worst wear on board ship, and too hot and heavy for India."

There were other reasons, Maria thought in her own mind, why one dress would be sufficient for her—that she might not live to require another. She did not speak of this feeling; she shrunk from doing so. In the first place, she was not sure of this: the under-current of conviction of it lay so very deep in her heart that it was not always apparent to her. Now and then she had hinted it to George—that it might be. George would not by any means receive it; he partly reasoned, partly soothed her out of it; and he went privately to Mr. Snow, begged him to take all possible care of his wife, and asked whether there were really any grounds for alarm. Mr. Snow answered him much in the same terms that he had answered Margery to the like question—that he could not say for certain: she was, no doubt, very weak and poorly, but he saw no reason why she should not get out of it; and as for himself, he *was* taking of her all the care he could take. The reply satisfied George, and he became full of the projects and details of his departure, entering into them so warmly with her that Maria caught the spirit of enterprise, and was beguiled into a belief that she might yet go.

He had come home from the funeral bearing a parcel wrapped in paper for Meta. It had been found amidst Thomas Godolphin's things, directed to the child.

George lifted Meta on his knee; very grave, very subdued was his face to-day; and untied it. It proved to be a Bible, and on the fly-leaf in his own hand was written, "Uncle Thomas's last and best gift to Meta," and it was dated the day he died. Lower down were the words, "My ways are ways of pleasantness, and all my paths are peace."

And the evening had gone on, and it grew time for George to go. It was as he bent to kiss his wife that she had burst out with that wailing cry, "Oh, George! can't you stay with me!"

"My darling, I must go. I shall soon be down again."

"Only a little while! A little longer!"

The tone in its anguish quite distressed him. "I would stay if it were possible; but it is not. I came down for a day only, you know, Maria, and I have remained more than a week. It will not be so very long before we sail, and I shall have my hands full with the preparations for our voyage."

"I have been so much alone," she hysterically sobbed. "I get thinking and thinking: it does not give me a chance to get well. George, you have been always away from me since the trouble came."

"I could not help it. Maria, I could not bear Prior's Ash; I *could* not stop in it," he cried, with a burst of genuine truth. "But for you and Thomas, I should never have set my foot within the place again, once I was quit of it. Now, however, I am compelled to be in London; there are fifty things to see to. Keep up your courage, my darling! a little while, and we shall be together and happy as we used to be."

"Master," said Margery, putting her head in at the door, "do you want to catch the nine train?"

"All right," answered George.

“It may be all right if you run for it, it won’t be all right else,” grunted Margery.

He flew off, catching up his hand-portmanteau as he went, and waving his adieu to Meta. That young damsel, accustomed to be made a vast deal of, could not understand so summary and slighting a leave-taking, and she stood quite still in her consternation, staring after her papa: or rather at the door he had gone out of. Margery was right, and George found that he must indeed hasten if he would save the train. Maria, with a storm of hysterical sobs, grievous to witness, caught Meta in her arms, sat down on the sofa, and sobbed over the child as she strained her to her bosom.

Meta was used to her mamma’s grief now, and she lay quite still, her shoes and white socks peeping out beyond the black frock; nay, a considerable view of the straight little legs peeping out as well. Maria bent her head until her aching forehead rested on the fair and plump neck.

“Mamma! Mamma dear! Mamma’s crying for poor Uncle Thomas!”

“No,” said Maria, in the bitterness of her heart. “If we were but where Uncle Thomas is, we should be happy. I cry for us who are left, Meta.”

“Hey-day! and what on earth’s the meaning of this? Do you think this is the way to get strong, Mrs. George Godolphin?”

They had not heard him come in; Maria’s sobs were loud. Meta, always ready for visitors, scuffled off her mamma’s lap gleefully, and Mr. Snow drew a chair in front of Maria and watched her try to dry away her tears. He moved a little to the right, that the light of the lamp which was behind him might fall upon her face.

“Now just you have the goodness to tell me what it is that’s the matter.”

“I—I am low spirited, I think,” said Maria, her voice subdued and weak now.

“Low spirited!” echoed Mr. Snow. “Then I’d get high spirited if I were you. I wish there had never been such a thing as spirits invented, for my part! A nice excuse it is for you ladies to sigh and groan half your time, instead of being rational and merry, as you ought to be. A woman of your sense ought to be above it, Mrs. George Godolphin.”

“Mr. Snow,” interrupted a troublesome little voice, “papa’s gone back to London. He went without saying good-bye to Meta!”

“Ah! Miss Meta had been naughty, I expect.”

Meta shook her head very decisively in the negative, but Mr. Snow had turned to Maria.

“And so you were crying after that roving husband of yours! I guessed as much. He nearly ran over me at the gate. ‘Step in and see my wife, will you, Snow?’ said he. ‘She wants tonics, or something.’ You don’t want tonics half as much as you want common sense, Mrs. George Godolphin.”

“I am so weak,” was her feeble excuse. “A little thing upsets me now.”

“Well, and what can you expect? If I sat over my surgery fire all day stewing and fretting, a pretty fit doctor I should soon become for my patients! I wonder you——”

“Have you looked at my new black frock, Mr. Snow?”

She was a young lady that would be attended to, let who would go without attention. She had lifted up her white pinafore and stood in front of him, waiting for the frock to be admired.

“Very smart indeed!” replied Mr. Snow.

“It’s not smart,” spoke Meta, resentfully. “My smart frocks are put away in the drawers. It is for Uncle Thomas, Mr. Snow! Mr. Snow, Uncle Thomas is in heaven now.”

“Ay, child, that he is. And it’s time that Miss Meta Godolphin was in bed.”

More resentment. “I sat up because papa was going. He said I was to sit up. Mr. Snow, Uncle Thomas has sent me a nice book; a Bible. Mamma says I am never to forget to read in it night and morning; always, always; when she’s gone to be with Uncle Thomas in heaven.”

Mr. Snow rose, marched to the door, and took upon himself to call Margery, asking whether she deemed it conducive to the health of young damsels to keep them out of bed to that hour. Margery came in a temper: it was her master’s fault; he *would* keep her up: and she supposed when he had got the child to himself over in them Botany Bay lands, and she, Margery, not at hand to see to things, he’d be for keeping her up till midnight.

“Then you don’t mean to go yourself?” cried Mr. Snow.

No, she didn’t, Margery answered. Not unless she took leave of her senses, and went off afore they come back to her. She could see enough of foreign folks at home here, and of elephants too. Anybody as liked to pay sixpence to a travelling caravan could feast their eyes on one o’ them beasts—and much good might it do ’em!

There was a battle with Miss Meta. She did not want to go to bed, and she resented the interference of a stranger. Margery was carrying her off, crying, shriek-

ing, and—the truth must be told—kicking, when Maria rose. “Put her down an instant, Margery.”

She stooped and gathered the child in her loving arms. A minute given to the subsiding of Miss Meta’s grief, or temper, whichever you like to call it, and then Maria whispered in her ear :

“Be good for my sake, darling. I am not well ; I think I am getting worse, Meta. Don’t grieve mamma while she is with you. Say good-night to Mr. Snow.”

Loving and obedient, and with a graciousness of spirit that many, far older, might have taken a pattern from, the child ran up to Mr. Snow, her hand held out, the tears of rebellion drying on her cheeks. “I’m going for mamma. Good-night, Mr. Snow.”

They could hear her chattering pleasantly as she went up-stairs with Margery. Mr. Snow stayed talking with Maria : charging her to do this, not to do the other, to go on with this medicine, to leave off that ; threatening her with unheard-of penalties if he caught her crying again in that violent fashion, only fit for a dramatic heroine at the play ; and largely promised her to be well in no time if she’d only attend to his directions and make an effort of herself. Perhaps those promises were vague, as certain other large promises you have heard of—those made to Meta by George.

That same night Mr. Snow was called up to Mrs. George Godolphin.—Let us call her so to the end ; but she is Mrs. Godolphin now. Margery was sleeping quietly, the child in a little bed by her side, when she was aroused by some one standing over her. It was her mistress in her night-dress. Up started the woman, wide awake instantly, crying out to know what was the matter.

“Margery, I shan’t be in time. There’s the ship

waiting to sail, and none of my things are ready. I can't go without my things."

Margery, experienced in illness of many kinds, saw what it was. That her mistress had suddenly awoke from some vivid dream, and in her weak state was unable to shake off the delusion. In fact, that species of half-consciousness, half-delirium was upon her, which is apt in the night-time to attack some patients labouring under long-continued and excessive weakness.

She had come up exactly as she got out of bed. No slippers on her feet, nothing extra put on her shoulders. As Margery threw a warm woollen shawl over those shoulders, she felt the ominous damp of the night-dress. A pair of list-shoes of her own were at the bed-side, and she hastily thrust them on her mistress's feet.

"Let's make haste down to your bed, ma'am, and we'll see about the things there."

Ere the lapse of another minute Maria was in the bed, Margery covering her warmly up. Margery had flung an old cloak over herself, and she now put on the list shoes, and stood talking with and humouring her mistress until her full consciousness should come.

"There'll be no time, Margery; there'll be no time to get the things: they never could be bought and made, you know. Oh, Margery! the ship must not go without me! What will be done?"

"I'll telegraph up to that ship to-morrow morning, and get him to put off his start for a week or two," cried Margery, nodding her head with authority. "Never you trouble yourself, ma'am; it'll be all right. You go to sleep again comfortable, and we'll see about the things with morning light."

Some little time Margery talked; a stock of this should be got in, a stock of the other: as for linen,

it could all be bought ready made—and the best way too, now calico was so cheap. Somewhat surprised that she heard no answer, no further expressed fear, Margery looked close at her mistress by the light of the night-lamp, wondering whether she had gone to sleep again. She had not gone to sleep. She was lying still, cold, white, without sense or motion; and Margery, collected Margery, very nearly gave vent to a scream.

Maria had fainted away. Margery did not understand it at all, or why she should have fainted when she ought to have gone to sleep. Margery liked it as little as she understood it; and she ran up-stairs to their landlady, Mrs. James, and got her to despatch her son for Mr. Snow.

Maria had recovered consciousness when he came in, both from the fainting-fit and from the delusion. He did not seem to think much of it; not half as much as he did of the violent paroxysm of weeping in which he had caught her in the evening: it was nothing but the effects of the exhaustion left by that, as he believed. He administered some restorative, and said he would come again betimes in the morning.

“I’ll stop here the rest of the night and watch,” said Margery, as he departed.

But Maria would not hear of it. “I am not ill, Margery; it has all passed. Indeed, I insist upon your going to your bed.”

“Well, then, don’t you get having none o’ them dreams, ma’am, again!” remonstrated Margery. “I don’t like ’em. You might catch your death of cold a-coming up that shivering staircase out of your hot bed. And the child, too! if she got woke up by your coming in, there’s no knowing what fright it mightn’t put her into!”

But that was only the beginning. Night after night would these attacks of semi-delirium beset her. Mr. Snow came and came, and drew an ominous face and doubled the tonics and changed them, and talked and joked and scolded. But it all seemed of no avail: she certainly did not get better. Weary, weary hours! weary, weary days! as she lay there alone, struggling with her malady. And yet no malady, either, that Mr. Snow could discover, nothing but a weakness which he only half believed in.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BANE : AS WAS PREDICTED YEARS BEFORE.

JANET and Bessy Godolphin sat with Mrs. George. The time had come for Janet to quit Ashlydyat, and she was paying her farewell visit to Maria. Maria looked pretty well when they had come in, as she sat at the window at work; at work with her weak and fevered hands. No very poetical employment, that on which she was engaged, but one which has to be done in most families nevertheless—stocking-darning. She was darning socks for Miss Meta. Miss Meta, her sleeves and white pinafore tied up with black ribbon, her golden curls somewhat in disorder, for the young lady had rebelliously broken from Margery and taken a race round the garden in the blowing wintry wind, her smooth cheeks fresh and rosy, was now roasting her face in front of the fire, her doll and a whole collection of dolls' clothes lying around her on the hearth-rug.

Maria laid down her work when the Miss Godolphins in their deep mourning entered, and rose to shake hands, and drew forward chairs for them, and did altogether as anybody else does at receiving intimate friends, and seemed pretty well. In moments of excitement—and the slightest thing excited her now—she appeared to be buoyed up with artificial strength. Meta bustled here

and there, and threw her doll into a corner, and scattered its clothes anywhere, and chattered without ceasing: she began telling Bessy of the large elephant papa would keep for her to go out riding upon in India.

Bessy had come, not so much to accompany Janet as for a special purpose—that of delivering a message from Lady Godolphin. My lady, deeming possibly that her displeasure had lasted long enough, graciously charged Bessy with an invitation to Maria—to spend a week at the Folly ere her departure for Calcutta. She would have come herself and invited her in person, she bade Bessy say, but for a bad cold which confined her in-doors, and she included Miss Meta in the invitation: a notable mark of attention, since Lady Godolphin much disliked children so long as they were at their troublesome age, and had never, in all the remembrance of Prior's Ash, invited one, Meta excepted, to a sojourn at her house.

“She was not for inviting Meta now,” said straightforward Bessy; “but I said I would take care that she was not troublesome in the presence of Lady Godolphin. I hope you will come, Maria. If you will fix your own time, she said, the carriage shall be here to bring you.”

Maria gave a sort of sobbing sigh. “She is very kind. Tell Lady Godolphin how kind I feel it of her, Bessy, but I am not well enough to go from home now.”

“My opinion was, that Maria would have little enough of time at home for her preparations for the voyage, without going from it for a week,” remarked Janet. “But about that, my dear”—turning kindly to her—“you must be the best judge.”

“I could not go, Janet; I am not strong enough. Bessy will be so kind as explain that to Lady Godolphin. I cannot get up before middle-day now.”

Bessy looked at her. "But, Maria, if you are not strong enough to go out on a week's visit, how shall you be strong enough to undertake a three or four months' voyage?"

Maria paused ere she answered the question. She was gazing out straight before her, as if seeing something at a distance—something in the future. "I think of it and of its uncertainty a great deal," she presently said. "If I can only get away; if I can only keep up sufficiently to get away, I can lie down in my berth always. And if I do die before I reach India, George will be with me."

"Child!" almost sharply interrupted Janet, "what are you saying?"

She seemed scarcely to hear the interruption. She sat, gazing still, her white and trembling hands lying clasped on her black dress, and she resumed, as if pursuing the train of thought.

"My great dread is, lest I should not keep up to get to London, to be taken on board; lest George should, after all, be obliged to sail without me. It is always on my mind, Janet; it makes me dream constantly that the ship is gone and I am left behind. I wish I did not have those dreams."

"Come to Lady Godolphin's Folly, Maria," persuasively spoke Bessy. "It will be the very best thing to cheat you of these fears. They all arise from weakness."

"Yes, I say so to myself in the daytime; that these night fancies are only the result of weakness," acquiesced Maria, who appeared to rouse up from her dreamy thought at Bessy's remark. "But I am not well enough to go to the Folly, Bessy. Margery can tell you how ill I am every night, after I wake out of those

fever-dreams. The first night they fetched Mr. Snow to me, for I fainted."

"My dear," said Janet, soothingly and quietly, "the change to the sea air, to the altogether different life of the voyage, may restore you to health and strength in an incredibly short time."

"At times I think it may," answered Maria. "I had a pleasant dream one night," she added, with some animation. "I thought we had arrived in safety, and I and George and Meta were sitting under a tree whose leaves were larger than an umbrella. I was so hot, but these leaves shaded us, and I seemed to be well, for we were all laughing merrily together. It *may* come true, you know, Janet."

"Yes," assented Janet. "Are you preparing much for the voyage?"

"Not yet. Clothes can be had so quickly now. George talked it over with me when he was down, and we decided to send a list to the outfitter's, just before we sailed, so that the things might not come down here, but be packed in London."

"And Margery?" asked Janet.

"I do not know what she means to do," answered Maria, shaking her head. "She protests ten times a day that she will not go; but I see she is carefully mending up all her cotton gowns, and one day I heard her say to Meta that she supposed nothing was bearable but cotton on a body's back out there. What I should do without Margery on the voyage I don't like to think. George told her to consider of it, and give us her decision when he next came down. And you, Janet? When shall you be back at Prior's Ash?"

"I do not suppose I shall ever come back to it," was Janet's answer. "Its reminiscences will not be so

pleasing to me that I should seek to renew my acquaintance with it. What have I left here now? Nothing, save the grave of Thomas, and of my father and mother. Cecilia has her new ties: and Bessy can come to see me in Scotland."

"Bexley attends you, I hear."

"Yes. My aunt's old servant has got beyond his work—he has been forty-two years in the family, Maria—and Bexley will replace him. I—What is it, child?"

Janet turned to Meta, who was making a great commotion. In searching in a deep basket for some doll's clothes to show to Bessy, she had come upon a charming frock elaborately braided, which was decidedly too big for the doll. Of course Meta jumped to the conclusion that it must be for herself, and she was just as fond of finery as are other women in embryo. Dragging the material from its place, she flew over to her mamma, asking whether it was not hers, and when she might put it on, utterly regardless of two long streams of braid which trailed after it.

Ah, how sick did Maria turn with the sight; with the remembrance it brought to her! That long past day, the last of her happiness, when she had been working quickly to finish the frock, rose vividly before her mind's eye. She saw herself sitting there, in her own pleasant morning-room at the bank, blithely plying her needle in her unconscious peace, knowing nothing of those ominous shutters that were being drawn over the bank windows. What with sickness of heart and of body, Maria had never had courage to bring the frock to light since, or to attempt to finish it.

"Put it up again, Meta," she said, faintly.

But Bessy had laid hold of it; industrious, practical

Bessy. "Let me finish this for you, Maria. It will be a nice cool frock for the child in India. Dear me! there's not above an hour or two's work wanted at it. I'll take it home with me."

Maria murmured something about the trouble that came upon her, the illness that supervened upon it, as a lame attempt at apology. She was aware that unfinished work, lying by indefinitely, was little less than a cardinal sin in the eyes of methodical Janet. Bessy folded it up to take with her, and Janet rose.

"No, stay where you are, child," she said, bending over Maria, who was then lying back in her chair, looking grievously wan and ill, "I can say good-bye to you as you lie there. Take this, my dear," she whispered. "It is for yourself."

Janet had slipped four sovereigns into her hand. Maria's face turned crimson. "You need not scruple, Maria. It is superfluous in my purse. My aunt sent me a handsome present for mourning and travelling expenses; a great deal more than I want."

"Indeed I have enough too, Janet. George left me five pounds when he was at home, and it is not half gone. You don't know what a little keeps us. I eat next to nothing, and Margery, I think, lives chiefly upon porridge: there's only Meta."

"But you ought to eat, child!"

"I can't eat," said Maria. "I have never lost that pain in my throat."

"What pain?" asked Janet.

"I do not know. It came on with that trouble. I feel—I feel always ill within me, Janet. I seem to be always shivering inwardly; and the pain in the throat is sometimes better, sometimes worse, but it never goes quite away."

Janet looked at her searchingly. She heard the meek, resigned tone, she saw the white and wan face, the attenuate hands, the chest rising with every passing emotion, the sad, mournful look in the sweet eyes, and for the first time a suspicion that another life would shortly have to go, took possession of Miss Godolphin.

“What is George at, that he is not here to see after you?” she asked, in a strangely severe accent.

“He cannot bear Prior’s Ash, Janet,” whispered Maria. “But for me and Thomas, he never would have come back to it. And I suppose he is busy in London: there must be many arrangements to make.”

Janet stooped and gravely kissed her; kissed her twice. “Take care of yourself, my dear, and do all you can to keep your mind tranquil and to get your strength up. You shall hear from me before your departure.”

Margery stood in the little hall. Miss Bessy Godolphin was in the garden, in full chase after that rebellious damsel, Meta, who had made a second escape through the opened door, passing angry Margery and the outstretched hand that would have made a prisoner of her, with a gleeful laugh of defiance. Miss Godolphin stopped to address Margery.

“Shall you go to India or not, Margery?”

“I’m just a’most tore in two about it, ma’am,” was the answer, delivered confidentially, “Without me that child would never reach the tother side alive: she’d be clambering up the sides o’ the ship and get drownded ten times over afore they got there. Look at her now! And who’d take care of her over there, among them native beasts—them elephants and them black people? If I thought she’d ever come to be waited on by a black animal of a woman with a yellow

cover to her head and woolly hair, I should be fit to smother her afore she went out. Miss Janet, I'd like much to talk that and some other matters over with you, if you'd got half an hour to spare me afore you start."

"Very well, Margery. Perhaps you can come to Ashlydyat to-night. I am going, you know, by to-morrow's early train. Margery," she more seriously added, "your mistress appears to want the greatest care."

"She have wanted that a long while," was Margery's composed answer.

"She ought to have everything strengthening in great plenty. Wine and other necessaries requisite for the sick."

"I suppose she ought," said Margery. "But she won't take 'em, Miss Janet; she says she can't eat and drink. And for the matter of that, we have got nothing of that sort for her to take. There was more good things consumed in the bank in a day than we should see in a month now."

"Where's your master?" repeated Janet, in an accent not less sharp than the one she had used for the same question to Maria.

"He!" cried wrathful Margery, for the subject was sure to put her uncommonly out, in the strong opinion she was pleased to hold touching her master's shortcomings, "I suppose he's riding about with his choice friend, Madam Pain. Folks talks of their two horses being seen abreast pretty often."

There was no opportunity for further colloquy. Bessy came in, carrying the shrieking, laughing truant; and Margery, with a tart word to the young lady, and a jerk of the little arm by way of reminder, attended the

Miss Godolphins down the garden path to throw open the gate for them. In her poor way, in her solitary self, Margery strove to make up for the state they had been accustomed to, when the ladies called from Ashlydyat.

Maria, lying motionless on the sofa, where on being left alone she had thrown herself in weariness, heard Margery's gratuitous remark about Mrs. Pain, through the unlatched door, and a contraction of pain arose to her brow. In her hand lay the four sovereigns left there by Janet. She looked at them musingly, and then murmured, "I can afford to give her half." When Margery returned in-doors, she called her in.

"You are not very busy this afternoon, are you, Margery?"

Margery grunted out her answer. Not so over-busy, perhaps; but for the matter of that there was always plenty to do.

"Can you go down as far as the Pollard cottages?" resumed Maria. "I wish very much to see Mrs. Bond, Margery. Ask her to come up here. It will be a nice walk for you and Meta."

Margery looked dubious. The wind was in the east, and would blow sharply on her darling: and that Dame Bond, in Margery's opinion, was better in her own house than in theirs. But she made no remonstrance: crusty as she appeared to be in temper, she was a better servant than to attempt to dispute her mistress's will, and she dressed herself and Meta, and started.

But no sooner had they gone than they were back again, and Mrs. Bond with them, for they had discerned that respected lady sailing along, almost immediately after quitting the house. Very steady on her legs was Mrs. Bond to-day: her face had a pinched look, and

her thin shawl and wretched old black gown were drawn tight round her to protect her, so far as might be, from the early winter's cold. Margery eyed her critically, and with a sniff which really might have been taken to express a sort of satisfaction, crossed the road, holding Meta by the hand.

“Now, Dame Bond! where be you off to?”

Dame Bond, of humble mind when not exalted by extraneous adjuncts, dropped a curtsy to Margery and another to Miss Meta. She heered the ladies at t'other end of the town was a putting down the names for the coal charity a'ready, and she was a going to see if she couldn't get hers put down among 'em; they refused her last year. Goodness know'd as she'd need of it.

“Well, Mrs. George Godolphin wants to speak to you, so you'd better come to her at once,” said Margery. “And take care of your behaviour when you be in her presence,” she sharply added.

There was not altogether need to give that injunction to-day. Mrs. Bond, on her meekest and civilest behaviour, stood before Maria, who rose up from her sofa, and kindly invited her to a chair. Then she put two sovereigns in her hand.

“It is the first instalment of my debt to you, Mrs. Bond. If I live, I will pay it you all, but it will be by degrees. And perhaps that is the best way that you could receive it. I wish I could have given you some before.”

Mrs. Bond burst into tears. Not the crocodile's tears that she was somewhat in the habit of favouring the world with when not entirely herself, but real genuine tears of gratitude. She had given up all hope of the ten pounds, did not look to receive a penny piece of it;

and the joy overcame her. Her conscience pricked her a little also, for she remembered sundry hard words she had at one time liberally regaled her neighbours' ears with, touching Mrs. George Godolphin. In her grateful repentance she could have knelt at Maria's feet: hunger and other ills of poverty had tended to subdue her spirit.

"May the good Lord bless and repay ye, ma'am!—and send ye a safe journey to the far-off place where I hear ye be a going!"

"Yes, I shall go if I am well enough," replied Maria. "It is from thence that I shall send you home some money from time to time as I can. Have you been well lately?"

"As well as pretty nigh clamming 'll let me be, ma'am. Things has gone hard with me: many a day I've not had as much as a mouldy crust. But this 'll set me up again, and, ma'am, I'll never cease to pray for ye."

"Don't spend it in—in—you know, Mrs. Bond," Maria ventured timidly to advise, in a lowered voice.

Mrs. Bond shook her head and turned up her eyes by way of expressing a very powerful negative. Probably she did not feel altogether comfortable in the subject, for she hastened to quit it.

"Have ye heard the news about old Jekyl, ma'am?"

"No. What news?"

"He be dead. He went off at one o'clock this a'ter-noon. He fretted continual after his money, folks says, and it wore him down to a skeleton. He couldn't abear to be living upon his sons, and Jonathan, he don't earn enough for hisself now, and the old 'un felt it."

Somebody else was feeling it. Fretting continually after his money!—that money which might never have

been placed in the bank but for her! Poor Maria pressed her fingers upon her aching forehead: and Mrs. Bond plunged into another item of news.

“Them Hardings be bankrupts.”

“Harding the undertaker?” cried Maria, quickly.

“They be, ma’am. The shop were shut up as close as a dungeon when I come by it just now, and a man, what was standing there a staring at it, said as he heered it ’ud go hard with ’em. There ain’t nothing but trouble in the world now, ma’am, for some.”

No, nothing but trouble for some: Maria felt the truth to her heart of hearts. The remembrance of the interview she had held with Mrs. Harding, and what had been said at it, was very present to her.

Perhaps it was well that a divertisement occurred. Miss Meta, who had been up-stairs with Margery to have her things taken off, came in in her usual flying fashion, went straight up to the visitor, and leaned her pretty arm upon the snuffy black gown.

“When shall I come and see the parrot?”

“The parrot! Lawks bless the child! I haven’t got the parrot now, I haven’t had him for this many a day. I couldn’t let *him* clam,” she continued, turning to Maria, “I was a clamming myself, ma’am, and I sold him, cage and all, just as he stood.”

“Where is he?” asked Meta, looking disappointed.

“He’s where he went,” lucidly explained Mrs. Bond. “It were the lady up at the tother end o’ the town beyond the parson’s, what bought him, ma’am. Leastways her daughter did: sister to her what was once to have married Mr. Godolphin. It’s a white house.”

“Lady Sarah Grame’s,” said Maria. “Did she buy the parrot?”

“Miss did; that cross-looking daughter of her’n.

She see him as she was a going by my door one day, ma'am, and she stopped and looked at him, and asked me what I'd sell him for. Well, on the spur o' the moment I said five shilling; for I'd not a halfpenny in the place to buy him food, and for days and days he had had only what the neighbours brought him—but it warn't half his worth. And miss was all wild to buy him, but her mother wasn't, she didn't want screeching birds in her house, she said, and they had a desperate quarrel in my kitchen afore they went away. Didn't she call her mother names! She's a vixen, that daughter, if ever there were one. But she got her will, for, an hour or two after that, a young woman come down for the parrot with the five shilling in her hand. And there's where he is."

"I shall have twenty parrots when I go to India," struck in Meta.

"What a sight o' food they'll eat!" ejaculated Mrs. Bond. "That there one o' mine eats his fill now. I made bold one day to go up and ask after him, and the two young women in the kitchen took me to the room to see him, the ladies being out, and he had got his tin stuffed full o' seed. He knowed me again, he did, and screeched out to be heerd a mile off. The young women said that what with his screeching and the two ladies quarrelling, the house weren't a-bearable sometimes."

Meta's large eyes were wide open in wondering speculation. "Why do they quarrel?" she asked.

"'Cause it's their natur," returned Mrs. Bond. "The one what had the sweet natur was took, and the two fretful ones was left. Them young women said that miss a'most druv t'other, my lady, mad with her temper, and they expected nothing less but there'd be blows

some day. A fine disgraceful thing to say o' born ladies, ain't it, ma'am?"

Maria in her delicacy of feeling would not endorse the remark of Dame Bond. But the state of things at Lady Sarah Grame's was perfectly well known at Prior's Ash. Do you remember an observation made by Mr. Snow to Thomas Godolphin, when he was speaking of Lady Sarah's cruel unkindness to Ethel? "She'll be brought to her senses, unless I am mistaken: she has lost her treasure and kept her bane. A year or two more, and that's what Sarah Anne will be."

It was precisely what Sarah Anne Grame had become—her mother's bane. A miserable bane! to herself, to her mother, to all about her. And the "screeching" parrot had only added a little more noise to an already too noisy house.

Mrs. Bond curtseyed herself out. She met Margery in the passage, and stopped to whisper.

"I say! how ill she do look!"

"Who looks ill?" was the ungracious demand.

Mrs. Bond gave her head a nod sideways towards the parlour door. "The missis. Her face looks more as if it had got death writ in it, nor voyage-going."

"Perhaps you'll walk on your road, Dame Bond, and keep your opinions till they're asked for," was the tart reply of Margery.

But in point of fact the ominous words had darted into the faithful servant's heart, piercing it as a poisoned arrow. It seemed so great a confirmation of her own fears.

CHAPTER XX.

COMMOTION AT ASHLYDYAT.

A FEW more days went on, and they wrought a rapid change in Mrs. George Godolphin. She grew weaker and weaker: she grew—it was apparent now to Mr. Snow as it was to Margery—nearer and nearer to that vault in the churchyard of All Souls'. There could no longer be any indecision or uncertainty as to her taking the voyage: the probabilities were, that before the ship was ready to sail, all sailing in this world for Maria would be over. And rumours, faint, doubtful, very much discredited rumours of this state of things, began to circulate in Prior's Ash.

Discredited because people were so unprepared for it. Mrs. George Godolphin had been delicate since the birth of her baby, as was known to everybody, but not a soul, relatives, friends, or strangers, had felt a suspicion of danger. On the contrary, it was supposed that she was about to depart on that Indian voyage: and ill-natured spirits jerked up their heads and said it was fine to be Mrs. George Godolphin, to tumble upon her legs again and go out to lead a grand life in India, after ruining half Prior's Ash. How she was misjudged! how many more unhappy wives have been, and will be again, misjudged by the world!

One dreary afternoon, as the dusk was coming on, Margery, not stopping, or perhaps not caring, to put anything upon herself, but having hastily wrapped up Miss Meta, went quickly down the garden path, leading that excitable and chattering demoiselle by the hand. Curious news had reached the ears of Margery. Their landlady's son had come in, describing the town as being in a strange commotion, in consequence of something which had happened at Ashlydyat. Rumour set it down as nothing less than murder; and according to the boy's account, all Prior's Ash was flocking up to the place to see and to hear.

Margery turned wrathful at the news. Murder at Ashlydyat! The young gentleman was too big to be boxed or shaken for saying it, but he persisted in his story, and Margery in her curiosity went out to see with her own eyes. "The people are running past the top of this road in crowds," he said to her.

Not in "crowds," certainly. Tongues are exaggeratory as rumour is false. When Margery reached the top of the road, several idlers undoubtedly were hastening past in the direction of Ashlydyat, but not so very many. Margery, pouncing upon one and upon another, contrived to obtain a pretty correct account of the actual facts.

For some days past, workmen had been employed, digging up the Dark Plain by the orders of Lord Averil. As he had told Cecil weeks before, his intention was completely to renovate it; to do away entirely with its past ill character and send its superstition to the winds. The archway was being taken down, the gorse-bushes were being uprooted, the whole surface, in fact, was being dug up. He intended to build an extensive summer-house where the archway had been

and to make the plain a flower-garden, a playground for children when they should be born to Ashlydyat: and it appeared that in digging that afternoon under the archway, the men had come upon a human skeleton, or rather upon the bones of what had once been a skeleton. This was the whole foundation for the rumour and the "murder."

As Margery stood, about to turn home again, vexed for having been brought out in the cold for nothing more, and intending to give a few complimentary thanks for it to the young man who had been the means of sending her, she was accosted by Mr. Crosse. That gentleman, whose residence was situated about three miles from Prior's Ash, had been living at it since his return, the night you saw him coming from the rail when he was met by Charlotte Pain. He had been frequently at Ashlydyat, had been a closer friend of Thomas Godolphin's than ever; but not the slightest notice had he taken of George or his wife. His opinion of George was about as bad as it could be, and he did not seek to conceal it. How he would have reconciled himself to meet him at the funeral it is impossible to say, but circumstances prevented Mr. Crosse's attendance at it. For a day or two before Thomas Godolphin's death and a week after it, he was laid up with gout, and unable to leave his house. Now he was out again.

"How d'ye do, Margery?" he said, lifting up Meta at the same time to kiss her, for the young lady had been an uncommon favourite of his in the old days at the bank, and he used to lavish presents upon her, just for the sake of watching her delight at their reception. "Are you going up to Ashlydyat with the rest?"

“Not I, the simpletons!” was Margery’s free rejoinder. “I’ll be bound it’s nothing but the bones of some poor old donkey that they’ve found—the animals used to stray sometimes on to the Dark Plain. And me to have been brought out from home by their folly, leaving my mistress all alone!—and she’s not in a state to be left.”

“Is she ill?” asked Mr. Crosse.

“Ill!” returned Margery, not at all pleased at the question. “Yes, sir, she is ill. I thought everybody knew that.”

“When does she start for India?”

“She don’t start at all. She’ll be starting soon for a place a little bit nearer. Here! you run on and open the gate,” added Margery, whisking Meta from Mr. Crosse’s hand and sending her down the lane out of hearing. “She’ll soon be where Mr. Thomas Godolphin is, sir, instead of being marched off in a ship to India,” continued the woman, turning to Mr. Crosse confidentially.

He felt greatly shocked. In his own mind, he, as many others, had associated Maria with her husband, in regard to the summer’s work, in a lofty, scornful, hold-myself-off sort of way: but it did shock him to hear that she was in fear of death. It is most wonderful how our feelings towards others soften when we find they and their shortcomings are about to be taken from us to a more merciful Judge.

“But what is the matter with her, Margery?” Mr. Crosse asked; for it happened that he had not heard the ominous rumours that were beginning to circulate in Prior’s Ash.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with her,” returned Margery. “I don’t believe old Snow knows it, either.

I suppose the worry and misfortunes have been too much for her; that she couldn't bear up again 'em. They fell upon nobody, unless it was Mr. Thomas Godolphin, as they have fell upon her, and she's just one to break her heart over 'em. She and him have been expiating another's folly: Mr. Godolphin is in his grave, and she's a going to it."

Mr. Crosse walked mechanically by the side of Margery down the lane. It was not his road, and perhaps he was unconscious that he took it; he walked by her side, listening.

"He'll have to go by himself now—and me to have been getting up all my cotton gowns for the start! Serve him right! for ever thinking of taking out that dear little lamb amid elephants and savages!"

Mr. Crosse was perfectly aware that Margery alluded to her master—his own *bête noire* since the explosion. But he did not choose to descant upon his gracelessness to Margery. "Can nothing be done for Mrs. George Godolphin?" he asked.

"I expect not, sir. There's nothing the matter with her that can be laid hold of," resentfully spoke Margery, "no malady to treat. Snow says he can't do anything, and he brought Dr. Beale in the other day: and it seems he can't do nothing, either."

Meta had gained the gate, flung it open in obedience to orders, and now came running back. Mr. Crosse took her hand and went on with her. Was he purposing to pay a visit to George Godolphin's wife? It seemed so.

It was quite dusk when they entered. Maria was lying on the sofa, with a warm woollen coverlid drawn over her. There was no light in the room save that given out by the fire, but its blaze fell directly on her

face. Mr. Crosse stood and looked at it, shocked at the ravages; at the tale it told. All kinds of unpleasant pricks were sending their darts through his conscience. He had been holding himself aloof in his assumed superiority, his haughty condemnation, while she had been going to the grave with her breaking heart.

Had she wanted things that money could procure? had she wanted *food*? Mr. Crosse actually began to ask himself the question, as the wan aspect of the white face grew and grew upon him: and in the moment he quite loathed the thought of his well-stored coffers. He remembered what a good, loving, gentle woman this wife of George Godolphin's had always been, this dutiful daughter of All Souls' pastor: and for the first time Mr. Crosse began to separate her from her husband's misdoings, to awake to the conviction that the burden and sorrow laid upon her had been enough to bear, without the world meting out its harsh measure of blame by way of increase.

He sat down quite humbly, saying "hush" to Meta. Maria had dropped into one of those delirious sleeps: they came on more frequently now, and would visit her at the dusk hour of the evening as well as at night: and the noise of their entrance had failed to arouse her. Margery, however, came bustling in.

"It's Mr. Crosse, ma'am."

She partially awoke. Only partially: turned on the pillow, opened her eyes, and held out her hand. He leaned over her, and spoke in a very kind voice as he took it.

"I am so sorry to see you like this, Mrs. George Godolphin. I had no idea you were so ill. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"If I could pay Mrs. Bond!" she answered. "She

is so poor! If I could but pay her before the ship sails! If I could pay the Hardings!"

Mr. Crosse saw the state of things instantly—that she was under the influence of some vivid dream. Margery spoke in a louder key, and advanced to shake up the sofa pillow. "You'd be better sitting up, ma'am. It's Mr. Crosse: don't you know him? Me and the child met him out there, and he come in with us to see you."

It had the desired effect, completely arousing her: and Maria, a faint hectic of surprise coming into her cheeks, sat up and let him take her hand. "I am glad to have the opportunity of seeing you once again," she said.

"Why did you not send and tell me how ill you were?" burst forth Mr. Crosse, forgetting how exceedingly ill such a procedure would have accorded with his own line of holding aloft in condemnatory superiority.

She shook her head. "I might, had things been as they used to be. But people do not care to come near me now."

"And it was not your fault!" cried Mr. Crosse in his heat, in his self-reproach.

"No, it was not my fault," she sadly answered, believing he had spoken it as a question. "I knew nothing about it any more than the greatest stranger. The blow fell upon me as startlingly as it fell upon the rest."

"I am going in the ship, Mr. Crosse. I am going to ride upon an elephant and to have parrots. I'm going to take my dolls."

He laid his hand kindly upon the chattering child: but he turned to Maria, his voice dropping to a whisper. "What shall you do with her? Shall you send her out without you?"

The question struck upon the one chord of her heart that for the last day or two, since her own hopeless state grew more palpable, had been strung to the utmost tension. What was to become of Meta—of the cherished child whom she must leave behind her? Her face grew moist, her bosom heaved, and she suddenly pressed her hands upon it as if they could still its wild and painful beating. Mr. Crosse, blaming himself for asking it, blaming himself for many other things, took her hands within his, and said he would come in and see her in the morning, she seemed so fatigued then.

But, low as the question had been put, Miss Meta heard it; heard it and understood its purport. Rely upon it, children understand far more than we give them credit for. She entwined her pretty arms within her mamma's dress as Mr. Crosse went out, and raised her wondering eyes.

“What did he mean? You are coming too, mamma!”

She drew the little upturned face close to hers, she laid her white cheek upon the golden hair. The very excess of pain that was rending her aching heart caused her to speak with unnatural stillness. Not that she could speak at first: a minute or two had to be given to master her emotion.

“I am afraid not, Meta. I think God is going to take me.”

The child made no reply. Her earnest eyes were kept wide open with the same wondering stare. “What will papa do?” she presently asked.

Maria hastily passed her hand across her brow, as if that recalled another phase of the pain. Meta's little heart began to swell, and the tears burst forth.

“Don't go, mamma! Don't go away from papa and Meta! I shall be afraid of the elephants without you.”

She pressed the child closer and closer to her beating heart. Oh the pain, the pain!—the pain of the parting that was so soon to come! How she beat down its outward signs, how she continued to speak calmly, surprised herself.

“Meta, darling, I think I have lately been getting in spirit nearer and nearer to God—as Uncle Thomas got near to Him; and I see things in a different light from what I had used to see them. I do not suppose you will go out now; but if you should, God will take care of you amidst the elephants and all other dangers. I am asking Him always; and I know He will take charge of you here Himself, and bring you to me when your life is over. There are times, Meta, as I lie here alone, when God seems to be quite close to me, and I have learnt that there is no friend on earth like Him. Meta! when my heart is ready to break at leaving you, it is He who whispers to me that I may trust all to Him. He is listening to me now, darling; He is quite close; He sees every one of your tears; He knows that I can scarcely say this to you for my aching pain, and He will be a more loving protector to my little motherless girl than I could have been. I shall be up there in heaven, waiting for you and looking down upon you, and God will be taking care of you on earth.”

Meta turned her eyes to the uncurtained window, looking up to the winter evening sky. “Has heaven got windows?” she asked.

“I think it has. I think that God lets us look down on the dear ones we have left. At least—at least—it is pleasant to think so when we are about to leave them. Meta, darling, it can do you no harm to think so. When mamma shall be gone to that better place, and you are left alone here, you can look up often and

think of the time that *you* will be going there. It will soon come."

Perhaps it was as well that they were interrupted: these moments are too painful to be much prolonged. Meta was sobbing with all her might, when her attention was diverted by a clash and dash at the gate. A carriage had bowled down the lane and drawn up at it, almost with the commotion that used to attend the dashing visits to the bank of Mrs. Charlotte Pain. A more sober equipage this, however, with its mourning appointments, although it bore a coronet on its panels. The footman descended to open the door, and one lady stepped out of it.

"It is Aunt Cecil," called out Meta.

She rubbed the tears from her pretty cheeks, her grief forgotten, child-like, in the new excitement, and flew out to meet Lady Averil. Maria, trying to look her best, rose from the sofa and tottered forward to receive her. Meta was pounced upon by Margery and carried off to have her tumbled hair smoothed; and Lady Averil came in alone.

She threw back her crape veil to kiss Maria. She had come down from Ashlydyat on purpose to tell her the news of the bones being found: there could be little doubt that they were those of the ill-fated Richard de Commins, which had been so fruitlessly searched for: and Lady Averil was full of the excitement. Perhaps it was natural that she should be, being a Godolphin.

"It is most strange that they should be found just now," she cried; "at the very time that the Dark Plain is being done away with. You know, Maria, the tradition always ran that so long as the bones remained unfound, the Dark Plain would retain the appearance of a graveyard. Is it not a singular coincidence—that

they should be discovered at the moment that the Plain is being dug up? Were Janet here, she would say how startlingly all the old superstition is being worked out."

"I think one thing especially strange—that they should not have been found before," observed Maria. "Have they not been searched for often?"

"I believe so," replied Cecil. "But they were found under the archway, immediately under it: and I fancy they had always been searched for in the Dark Plain. When papa had the gorse-bushes rooted up they were looked for then in all parts of the Plain, but not under the archway."

"How came Lord Averil to think of looking under the archway?" asked Maria.

"He did not think of it. They have been found unexpectedly, without being searched for. The archway is taken down, and the men were digging the foundation for the new summer-house, when they came upon them. The grounds of Ashlydyat have been like a fair all the afternoon with people running up to see and hear," added Cecil. "Lord Averil is going to consult Mr. Hastings about giving them Christian burial."

"It does seem strange," murmured Maria. "Have you written to tell Janet?"

"No, I shall write to her to-morrow. I made haste down to you. Bessy came over from the Folly, but Lady Godolphin would not come: she said she had heard enough in her life of the superstition of Ashlydyat. She never liked it, you know, Maria; never believed in it."

"Yes, I know," Maria answered. "It used to anger her when it was spoken of. As it angered papa."

"As George used to pretend that it angered him. I think it was pretence, though. Poor Thomas, never. If

he did not openly accord belief to it, he never ridiculed. How are your preparations getting on, Maria?"

Maria was going across the room with feeble steps to stir the fire into a blaze. As the light burst forth, she turned her face to Lady Averil with a sort of apology.

"I do not know what Margery is about that she does not bring the lamp. I am receiving you but poorly, Cecil."

Cecil smiled. "I think our topic, the superstition of Ashlydyat, is best discussed in such light as this, than in the full glare of lamp-light."

But as Lady Averil spoke she was looking earnestly on Maria. The blaze had lighted up her wan face, and Cecil was struck aghast at its aspect. *Was it real?*—or was it but the effect cast by the shade of the firelight? Lady Averil had not heard of the ominous fears that were growing ripe, and hoped it was the latter.

"Maria! are you looking worse this evening? Or is the light deceiving me?"

"I dare say I am looking worse. I am worse. I am very ill, Cecil."

"You do not look fit to embark on this voyage."

Maria simply shook her head. She was sitting now in an old-fashioned elbow-chair, one white hand lying on her black dress, the other supporting her chin, while the firelight played on her wasted features.

"Would the little change to Ashlydyat benefit you, Maria? If so, if it would help to give you strength for your voyage, come to us at once. Now don't refuse! It will give us so much pleasure. You do not know how Lord Averil loves and respects you. I think there is no one he so respects as he respects you. Let me take you home with me now."

Maria's eyelashes were wet as she turned them on

her. "Thank you, Cecil, for your kindness: and Lord Averil—will you tell him so for me—I am always thanking in my heart. I wish I could go home with you; I wish I could go with a prospect of its doing me good; but that is over. I shall soon be in a narrower home."

Lady Averil's heart stood still and then bounded on again. "No, no! Surely you are mistaken! It cannot be."

"I have suspected it long, Cecil! but since the last day or two it has become a certainty, and even Mr. Snow acknowledges it. About this time yesterday, at the dusk hour, he was sitting here, and I bade him not conceal the truth from me. I told him that I knew it, and did not shrink from it; and therefore it was the height of folly for him to pretend ignorance to me."

"Oh, Maria! And have you no regret at leaving us? I should think it a dreadful thing if I were going to die."

"I have been battling with my regrets a long while," said Maria, bending her head and speaking in a low, subdued tone. "The leaving Meta is the worst. I know not who will take her, who will protect her: she cannot go with George, without—without a mother!"

"Give her to me," feverishly broke from the lips of Lady Averil. "You don't know how dearly I have ever loved that child. Maria, she shall never know the want of the good mother she has lost, so far as I can supply your place, if you will let her come to me. It is well that the only child of the Godolphins—and she is the only one—should be reared at Ashlydyat."

Of all the world, Maria could best have wished Lady Averil to have Meta: and perhaps there had been moments when in her troubled imagination she had hoped

it would be so. But she could not shut her eyes to its improbabilities.

“You will be having children of your own, Cecil. And there’s Lord Averil!”

“Lord Averil is over-indulgent to me. I believe if I wished to adopt half a dozen children, he would only smile and tell me to get a large nursery for them. I am quite sure he would like to have Meta.”

“Then—if he will—oh, Cecil, I should die with less regret!”

“Yes, yes, that is settled. He shall call and tell you so. But—Maria—is your own state so certain? Can nothing be done for you?—nothing be tried?”

“Nothing, as I believe. Mr. Snow cannot find out what is the matter with me. The trouble has been breaking my heart, Cecil: I know of nothing else. And since I grew alarmed about my own state, there has been the thought of Meta. Many a time I have been tempted to wish that I could have her with me in my coffin.”

“Aunt Cecil! Aunt Cecil! How many summer-houses are there to be, Aunt Cecil?”

You need not inquire whose interrupting voice it was. Lady Averil lifted the child on her knee, and asked whether she would come and pay her a long, long visit at Ashlydyat. Meta replied by inquiring into the prospect of swings and dolls’-houses, and Cecil plunged into promises as munificently as George could have done.

“Should George not be with you?” she whispered, as she bent over Maria previous to leaving.

“Yes, I am beginning to think he ought to be now. I intend to write to him to-night; but I did not like to disturb him in his preparations. It will be a blow to him.”

“What! does he not know of it?”

“Not yet. He thinks I am getting ready to go out with him. I *wish* I could have done so!”

No, not until the unhappy fact was placed beyond all doubt, would Maria disturb her husband. And she did it gently at last. “I have been unwilling to alarm you, George, and I would not do it now, but that I believe it is all too certain. Will you come down and see what you think of me? Even Mr. Snow fears there is no hope for me now. Oh, if I could but have gone with you! have gone with you to be your ever-loving wife still, in that new land!”

Lord Averil came in while she was addressing the letter. Greatly shocked, greatly grieved at what his wife told him, he got up from his dinner-table and walked down. Her husband excepted, there was no one whom Maria would have been so pleased to see as Lord Averil. He had not come so much to tell her that he heartily concurred in his wife’s offer with regard to the child, though he did say it—say that she should be done by entirely as though she were his own, and his honest honourable nature shone out of his eyes as he spoke it, as to see whether nothing could be done for herself, to entreat her to have further advice called in.

“Dr. Beale has been here twice,” was her answer. “He says there is no hope.”

Lord Averil held her hand in his, as he had taken it in greeting; his grave eyes of sympathy were bent with deep concern on her face. “Cecil thinks the trouble has been too much for you,” he whispered. “Is it so?”

A streak of hectic came into her cheek. “Yes, I suppose it is that. Turn on which side I would, there was no comfort, no hope. Throughout it all, I never had a friend, save you, Lord Averil: and you know, and

God knows, what you did for us. I have not recompensed you: I don't see how I could have recompensed you had I lived: but when I am gone, you will be happy in knowing that you took the greatest weight from one who was stricken by the world."

"And it did not save you!" he wailed.

"No, it did not save me. It saved me from trouble, but not, you see, from death. It must have been God's will that it should not."

"You have been writing to George?" he observed, seeing the letter on the table. "But it will not go to-night: it is too late."

"It can go up by to-morrow's day mail, and he will get it in the evening. Perhaps you will post it for me as you walk home: it will save Margery's going out."

Lord Averil put the letter in his pocket. He stood looking at her as she lay a little back in her easy-chair, his arm resting on the mantelpiece, and curious thoughts passing through his mind. Could he do nothing for her?—to avert the fate that was threatening her? He, a nobleman, rich in wealth, happy now in the world's favour; she, going to the grave in sorrow, it might be in privation—*what* could he do to help her?

There are moments when we speak out of our true heart, when the conventionalism that surrounds the best of us is thrown aside, all deceit, all form forgotten. Lord Averil was a good and true man, but never better, never truer than now, when he took a step forward and bent to Maria.

"Let me have the satisfaction of doing something for you! let me try and save you!" he implored in low earnest tones. "If that may not be, let me help to lighten your remaining hours. How can I best do it?"

She held out her hand to him; she looked up to him,

the gratitude she could not speak shining from her sweet eyes. "Indeed there is nothing now, Lord Averil. I wish I could thank you as you deserve for the past."

He held her hand for some time, but she seemed weak, exhausted, and he said good-night. Margery attended him to the outer gate, in spite of his desire that she should not, for the air was cold and seemed to threaten snow.

"Your mistress is very ill, Margery," he gravely said. "She seems to be in danger."

"I'm afeard she is, my lord. Up to the last day or two I thought she might take a turn and get over it; but since then she has got worse with every hour. There's some folks as can battle out things, and some folks as can't: she's one of the last sort, and she has been tried in all ways."

Lord Averil dropped the letter into the post-office, looking mechanically at its superscription, George Godolphin, Esquire. But that he was preoccupied with his own thoughts, he might have seen by the very writing how weak she was, for it was scarcely recognisable as hers. Very, very ill she looked; as if the end were growing ominously near; and Lord Averil did not altogether like the tardy summons which the letter would convey. A night and a day yet before George could receive it. A moment's commune with himself, and then he took the path to the railway station to the telegraph-office, and sent off a message:

"Viscount Averil to George Godolphin, Esquire.

"Your wife is very ill. Come down by first train."

CHAPTER XXI.

NEWS FOR ALL SOULS' RECTORY.

THE snow came early. It was nothing like Christmas yet, and here was the ground covered. The black skies had seemed to threaten it the previous night, but people were not prepared to find everything wearing a white aspect when they rose in the morning.

Have you forgotten that long room in All Souls' rectory, its three windows looking on the garden; at one of which windows Mrs. Hastings once stood complaining to the rector that David Jekyl did not sweep the dead leaves from the garden paths? You may look at almost the same scene now, save that the signs of winter instead of autumn are on the ground. Mrs. Hastings is not there, but the rector and David Jekyl are. The rector is shivering over a handful of fire in the room, and David outside is sweeping the snow from the paths.

When poverty enters the door, sickness very frequently creeps in after it. Whether it was that (though perhaps the word poverty is not precisely the correct one to apply to All Souls' rectory), or whether it was the grief which the summer and George Godolphin had brought them, certain it was, that both Mr.

and Mrs. Hastings had been for some time ailing. Mrs. Hastings had been urged by some friends, residing about forty miles off, to visit them for a little change ; it would set her up for the winter, they urged ; and she had at length yielded, and went to them about three days ago. She should remain but a few days, she said ; for she could not afford to be away from Maria in the last week or two of the latter's stay at Prior's Ash. No sooner had Mrs. Hastings left, than it appeared to be the rector's turn to get ill : an influenza cold, which had been hovering over him, grew worse. His own private opinion was, that he had laid its foundation at Thomas Godolphin's funeral, when he had stood bare-headed in the drizzling rain, and that it had since been smouldering within him.

He sat over the fire, shivering and shaking. It was not the substantial fire that you see in a grate where circumstances are easy and coals plentiful ; but a very sparing fire indeed ; and the rector now extended his hands to the blaze, and now turned his grey face to glance out at David Jekyl. He had persisted in doctoring his cold himself, but it seemed to get no better, and Rose had at length prevailed on him to send for Mr. Snow.

Rose was an efficient mistress of the house in the absence of her mother. Capability nearly always comes with the necessity for it : and it was proving so in the case of Rose Hastings. They kept but one servant now, and many household duties fell to Rose's share ; she also taught the little Chisholm girls, and kept them as quiet as she could. It *was* hard that these troubles should have fallen on the rector in his old age : his home made into a school, his household deprived of most of its comforts, his sons and daughters' prospects

destroyed. Isaac was toiling at his clerkship in London; Reginald in his hard life at sea, Harry as an usher in a school. Perhaps the only one to whom it had made no daily home difference was Grace. You may have thought him an unchristian minister, in saying he could not bring his mind to forgive George Godolphin; but I think a great many more of us, ministers or not ministers, would have said the same, not being hypocrites.

Mr. Hastings sat over the fire, dreamily watching David Jekyl, awaiting the visit of Mr. Snow, and thinking his own thoughts. David had got a bit of crape on his old felt hat for his recently-interred father: perhaps the officiating at the old man's burial, and standing in the bleak churchyard—though it did not either rain or snow—had not mended the rector's cold. He might have procured a friend to take the service for him, but Mr. Hastings was one who would never shrink from his duty so long as there was a possibility of his performing it. The crape on David's hat led the rector's thoughts to the old man, and thence to the deprivation brought to the old man's years, the loss to the sons, through George Godolphin. How many more, besides poor old Jekyl, had George Godolphin ruined! himself, that reverend clergyman, amongst the rest!

"A good thing when the country shall be rid of him!" spoke the rector, in his bitterness. "I would give all the comfort left in my life that Maria, for her own sake, had not linked her fate with his! But that can't be remedied now. I hope he will make her happier there, in her new home, than he has made her here!"

By which words you will gather that Mr. Hastings had no suspicion of the change in his daughter's state.

It was so. Lord and Lady Averil were not alone in learning the tidings suddenly; at, as may be said, the eleventh hour. Maria had not sent word to the Rectory that she was worse. She knew that her mother was absent, that her father was ill, that Rose was occupied; and the change from bad to worse had come upon herself so imperceptibly, that she saw not its real danger—as was proved by her not writing to her husband. The rector, as he sits there, has his mind full of Maria's voyage and its discomforts: of her changed life in hot India: and he is saying to himself that he shall get out in the afternoon and call to see her.

The room faced the side of the house, but as Mr. Hastings sat he could catch a glimpse of the garden gate, and presently he saw the well-known gig stop at it, and the surgeon descend.

“Well, and who's ill now?” cried Mr. Snow, as he let himself in at the hall-door, and Rose advanced to meet him. “Mrs. Hastings is not back, is she, Miss Rose?”

“It is papa who is not well, Mr. Snow. He is very poorly. I wished him to send for you yesterday, but he would not.”

Mr. Snow went into the room and took a seat in front of the rector, examined into his ailment, and gossiped at the same time, as was his wont; gossiped and grumbled.

“Ah, yes; just so: feel worse than you have felt for twenty years. Well, Mr. Hastings, you have only yourself to thank. If you won't keep yourself in health, you can't expect health to keep with you of its own accord.”

“How am I to keep myself in health more than I do?”

“How! Why, by taking care of yourself; by living a little bit up to the mark. Here have you been putting yourself upon half diet: what can you expect but

that any little ailments will find you out, when you have not strength to throw them off?"

"I have not put myself upon half diet," said Mr. Hastings.

"Pooh! As if I didn't know! You take as much as you want to eat perhaps in quantity, but in quality—what d'you say to that? You used to drink a glass of good ale with your dinner and a glass of good wine after it, and your table was in accordance with such moderate luxury: now it's cold mutton and small-beer. What do you expect can come of it, I say? A man may go through life without these things and be in perfect health; but a man who has been accustomed to take them cannot leave them off with impunity when he gets to your years."

"Suppose he is forced?—as I am. You know what I have to do now with my income, Snow, just as well as I know it. Necessaries we must have; luxuries for us are over. It is of no use talking nonsense or reverting to old times: I can hardly make both ends meet. The breaking of that bank was a comprehensive calamity, and I only suffer with the stream. Some are worse off than I."

"You had better go to bed and stop there till you are better, and live upon water-gruel the while," retorted Mr. Snow. "Where's the use of sending for me if you won't do what I tell you?"

"I'll take some wine if it is necessary now, if you mean that: but as to taking it as a regular beverage two or three glasses a day, it's out of the question. I happened to be just out of wine when that shock came, and to purchase a fresh stock is beyond me. Good wine demands its own price, and the bad is good for nobody, sick or well. Many a time have I given a bottle from

my cellar to a poor sick man, that he might not poison himself with the cheap rubbish sold out in pints to the poor."

Nobody knew that better than the surgeon. He had given his advice and medicine; the rector his wine and his counsel. Neither of them could look back on his life and reproach himself with not having done his duty.

"I suppose you are not serious in your advice about my going to bed," resumed the rector. "Because I shall not take it. I am not so ill as all that comes to; and I shall want to go out this afternoon."

"In this snow!"

"It does not snow now. I don't think it will snow again to-day. And weather does not hurt me; I am accustomed to be out in it."

"Why, you have just told me that you think you caught this cold over Mr. Godolphin's grave!"

"I think I did. I felt it coming on in my head the next day. I could not read the service in my hat, Snow, over *him*, and you know the rain was falling. Ah! there was another sufferer! But for the calamity that fell upon him, he might not have gone to the grave quite so soon."

"He felt it too keenly," remarked Mr. Snow. "And your daughter—there's another sad victim. Ah me! sometimes I wish I had never been a doctor, when I find all I can do in the way of treatment come to nought."

"If she can only get well through the fatigues of the voyage, she may be better in India. Don't you think so? The very change from this place will put new life in her."

Mr. Snow paused. "Of whom are you speaking, Mr. Hastings?"

"Of my daughter," was the answer, slight surprise in the tone. "George Godolphin's wife."

The truth flashed on the mind of the surgeon—that Mr. Hastings was as yet in ignorance of Maria's state of danger: and flashed with pain. Of course it was his duty to enlighten him, and he would rather have been spared the task. "When did you see her last?" he inquired.

"The day Mrs. Hastings left. I have not been well enough to go out much since. And I dare say Maria has been busy."

"I am sorry then to have to tell you that she has not been busy; that she has not been well enough to be busy. She is much worse."

There was a significance in the tone that spoke to the father more effectually than any words could have done. He was silent for a full minute, and then he rose from his chair and walked once up and down the room before he turned to Mr. Snow.

"The full truth, Snow? Tell it me."

"Well—the truth is, that hope is over. That she will not very long be here. I had no suspicion but that you knew it."

"I knew nothing of it; none of us knew of it. When I and her mother were with her last; it was, I tell you, the day Mrs. Hastings left; Maria was talking of going back to London with her husband the next time he came down to Prior's Ash. I thought her looking better that morning; she had quite a colour; she was in good spirits. When did you see her?"

"Now. I went up there before I came down to you. She gets worse and worse with every hour. Lord Averil telegraphed for George Godolphin last night: I met him coming to inquire after her, and he told me so."

“And I have not been informed of this!” burst forth the rector. “My daughter dying—for I infer no less—and I to be left in ignorance!”

“Nay,” said Mr. Snow, “I tell you I did not suppose but you were aware of it. I know you, or some of you, are often there.”

“But it happens—it just happens that none of us have been there since my wife’s departure,” returned Mr. Hastings, his tone changing to a wail. “Rose could not well get out, and I have been ill. I never cast a thought to her being worse. Why did she not send us word? What can Margery be about?”

“Understand one thing, Mr. Hastings—that until this morning we saw no fear of *immediate* danger. Lord Averil says he suspected it last night; I did not see her yesterday in the after-part of the day. I have known some few cases precisely similar to Mrs George Godolphin’s; where danger and death seem to have come suddenly on together.”

“And what is her disease?”

The surgeon threw up his arms. “I don’t know—unless the trouble has fretted her into her grave. Were I not a doctor, I might say she had died of a broken heart, but the faculty don’t recognise such a thing.”

Half an hour afterwards, the Reverend Mr. Hastings was hanging over his daughter’s dying bed. A dying bed, it too surely looked; and if Mr. Hastings had indulged a gleam of hope, the first glance at Maria’s countenance dispelled it. She lay wrapped in a shawl, the lace border of her nightcap shading her delicate face and its smooth brown hair, her eyes larger and softer and sweeter than of yore.

They were alone together. He held her hand in his,

he gently laid his other hand on her white and wasted brow. "Child! child! why did you not send to me?"

"I did not know I was so ill, papa," she panted. "I seem to have got so much worse this last night. But I am better than I was an hour ago."

"Maria," he gravely said, "are you aware that—that you are in a state of danger?—that death may supervene?"

"Yes, papa, I know it. I have seen it coming a long while: only I was not quite sure."

"And, my dear child, are you——" Mr. Hastings paused. He paused and bit his lips, gathering firmness to suppress the emotion that was rising. His calling made him familiar with death-bed scenes; but Maria was his own child, and nature will assert her supremacy. A minute or two and he was himself again: not a man living was more given to reticence in the matter of his own feelings than the rector of All Souls': he could not *bear* to betray emotion in the sight of his fellow-men.

"Are you prepared for death, Maria? Can you look upon it without terror?"

"I think I am," she murmured. "I feel that I am going to God. Oh, papa, forgive, forgive me!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears of emotion as she raised her arms to him in the moment's excitement. "The trouble has been too much for me; I could not shake it off. All the sorrow that has been brought upon you through us, I think of it always: my heart aches with thinking of it. Oh, papa, forgive me before I die! It was not my fault; indeed I did not know of it. Papa"—and the sobs became painfully hysterical, and Mr. Hastings strove in vain to check them—"I would have sacrificed my life to bring good to you and my dear

mamma; I would have *sold* myself, to keep this ill from you!"

"Child, hush! There has been nothing to forgive to *you*. In the first moment of the smart, if I cast an unkind thought to you, it did not last; it was gone almost as soon as it came. My dear child, you have ever been my loving and dutiful daughter. Maria, shall I tell it 'you?—I know not why, but I have loved you better than any of my other children."

She had raised herself from the pillow and was clasping his hand to her bosom, sobbing over it. Few daughters have loved a father as Maria had loved and venerated hers. The rector's face was preternaturally pale and calm, the effect of his powerfully suppressed emotion.

"It has been too much for me, papa. I have thought of your trouble, of the discomforts of your home, of the blighted prospects of my brothers, feeling that it was our work. I thought of it always, more perhaps than of other things; and I could not battle with the pain it brought, and it has killed me. But, papa, I am resigned to go: I know that I shall be better off. Before these troubles came, I had not learned to think of God; and I should have been afraid to die."

"It is through tribulation that we must enter the Kingdom," interposed the calm, earnest voice of the clergyman. "It must come to us here in some shape or other, my child; and I do not see that it signifies how, or when, or through whom it does come, if it takes us to a better world. You have had your share of it: but God is a just and merciful judge, and if He has given you a full share of sorrow, He will deal out to you His full recompence."

“Yes,” she gently said, “I am going to God. Will you pray for me, papa?—that he will pardon me and take me for Christ’s sake. Oh, papa! it seems—it seems when we get near death as if the other world were so very near to this! It seems but such a little span of time that I shall have to wait for you all before you come to me. Will you give my dear love to mamma if I should not live to see her, and say how I have loved her; say that I have but gone on first; that I shall be there ready for her. Papa, I dare say God will let me be ever waiting and looking for you.”

Mr. Hastings turned to search for a Book of Common Prayer. He saw Maria’s on her dressing-table—one which he had given her on her marriage, and written her name in—and he opened it at the “Visitation of the Sick.” He looked searchingly at her face as he returned: surely the signs of death were already gathering there!

“The last Sacrament, Maria?” he whispered. “When shall I come?”

“This evening,” she answered. “George will be here then.”

The Reverend Mr. Hastings bent his eyebrows with a frown, as if he thought——But no matter. “At eight o’clock, then,” he said to Maria, as he laid the book upon the bed and knelt down before it. Maria lay back on her pillow, and clasping her hands upon the shawl which covered her bosom, closed her eyes to listen.

It was strange that even then, as he was in the very act of kneeling, certain words which he had spoken to Maria years ago, should flash vividly into the rector’s mind—words which had referred to the death of Ethel Grame.

“The time may come, Maria—we none of us know what is before us—when some of you young ones who are left, may wish you had died as she has. Many a one, battling for very existence with the world’s carking cares, wails out a vain wish that he had been taken from the evil to come.”

Had the gift of prevision been on the rector of All Souls’ when he spoke those words to Maria Hastings? Poor child! lying there now on her early death-bed; with her broken heart! The world’s carking cares had surely done their work on Maria Godolphin!

CHAPTER XXII.

A CROWD OF MEMORIES.

BUT for mismanagement, how smoothly things might go on! That a great deal of mismanagement does exist in the world is certain; and it is equally certain that much of it might be avoided with a little care. That telegraphic despatch which Lord Averil had deemed well to send, and which had not been sent any too soon, did not reach George Godolphin for hours and hours.

It was taken to his lodgings between nine and ten at night, some two hours after the despatching of it by Lord Averil. A delay there, you will say, but that, as it proved, was of no consequence: had it flown upon the wings of the wind, been delivered at the same moment that it left Prior's Ash, George would not have had it.

George that day had gone out to dinner. He had made acquaintance with the agents of the Calcutta house, and had accepted a dinner engagement with one of them at his country residence, a few miles from town. Consequently, when the despatch arrived there was nobody to receive it but George's landlady; a worthy old person, who, as the saying runs, had seen

better days, and never thought she should have to let rooms for a living.

Now Mrs. Clark—for that was her name—had an invincible horror of telegraphic despatches. She had never received but two in her life: the one had told her of the drowning by accident of her only son; the other of the sudden death of her husband. Rather confused in her association of cause and effect, it was perhaps natural that she should henceforth connect these despatches with every kind of imaginative ill, and loudly express her conviction that the greatest bane ever invented for society was the electric telegraph.

The man arrived at her door with the despatch, and the servant went to her mistress. “A telegram come for Mr. George Godolphin, mum: sixpence to pay, and a book to sign.”

Mrs. Clark was struck nearly dumb with terror: for some minutes she flatly refused to touch it or to sign the book: and she and the man, who was called in, had a wordy argument. At length the man managed to get the signature and the sixpence, and he went out, leaving the despatch on the table.

“There’s death in it, Betsey, as sure as that we are here!” observed Mrs. Clark, gazing at it as it lay, but not taking it in her hands.

Betsey was dubious. “In my last place, mum, a gentleman used to have them telegrams continual, and they could have had nothing but fun in ’em, by the way he’d laugh over ’em.”

“Take it up-stairs, Betsey, and put it on Mr. Godolphin’s dressing-table,” was her mistress’s order. “Don’t put it in too conspicuous a place, for his eyes to light on it all at once; hide it partially: and

we'll prepare him a little, poor gentleman, before he goes up."

Betsey obeyed orders to the letter. Naturally an obedient servant, as servants run, she was also willing to spare pain—if there was pain to be spared—to Mr. George Godolphin. George had a pleasant manner to those who waited on him; poor though he now was, he had also a generous hand; and Betsey believed there could not be another gentleman such as he in all the world. She stood before the dressing-table, and looked about for a place "not too conspicuous," trying various situations to leave it in. Finally she put it flat on the white toilette-cover, and placed his glass shaving-pot upon it, so that only the sides of the despatch could be seen beyond.

And Mrs. Clark herself sat up to warn him. She believed, considerate old lady, that nobody could accomplish that delicate mission with the skill that she could—warn him sufficiently and yet not frighten him: and she sat up in her good-nature to do it.

It was past eleven when George came in. She hastened out of the parlour and caught him as he was lighting his candle, which was placed ready on the mahogany slab.

"There's something come for you to-night, sir; I paid sixpence. Not a letter, something else. You'll see it on your dressing-table, sir: I have had it placed there: and I thought I'd sit up to tell you of it, before you went up yourself."

"Thank you, ma'am," replied George.

He bounded up the stairs and entered his sitting-room, giving not a second thought to the communication of Mrs. Clark. That it could be a telegraphic despatch from home never so much as crossed his

imagination. The poor old lady's considerate caution had defeated its own ends: if she had but spoken out! George was in the height of his preparations for departure, and parcels and letters were arriving for him continually. Two letters, which had come by the evening post, were on the mantelpiece. He stayed to read them and then went into his bedroom.

Now it happened that a small parcel had also come for George that evening, and had been placed by Betsey on his dressing-table: the fact was not known to Mrs. Clark, and had probably been forgotten by the girl herself. But as George laid down his candle his eyes fell on this small parcel: and what more natural than that he should suppose it was the "something" alluded to by Mrs. Clark? He did suppose it, and he wondered at the old lady's intimation of having "sat up to tell him of it," but he let it slip from his mind.

George tore the paper that enclosed the parcel, and found it to contain a specimen necktie, which he had ordered to be sent. After that he went to bed, never having seen the despatch so quietly lying there.

Winter mornings are dark; very dark in London; and nine o'clock had struck before George rang for his shaving water. It was brought, and in taking up the glass pot, George for the first time saw what was under it. "Halloa!" he cried.

He tore it open: he read the ominous words from Viscount Averil. In another moment he was shouting down the stairs, astonishing Betsey, alarming Mrs. Clark, who came out of an upper room in a nightcap.

"When did this despatch come? Why was I not told of it?"

Alas! of what use was the explanation now?—that he

had been told of it, if he could but have understood. Of what use to reproach Mrs. Clark?—it could not recall the wasted hours; and the old lady had done her best according to her own feeble judgment.

Without the loss of an unnecessary moment, without breakfast, George Godolphin hastened to the railway station, and found himself just in time to miss an express train that would have carried him direct to Prior's Ash. Chafing at the delay he was condemned to, at his own impatience, at the misapprehension with regard to the despatch, chafing at the general state of things altogether, George could only bend to circumstances, and he did not arrive at Prior's Ash until three o'clock in the afternoon.

The first person he saw at the terminus was Lord Averil. That nobleman, wondering at George's non-appearance, believing that Maria was getting nearer to death with every hour, had come to the conclusion that by some mischance his message had miscarried; and he had now gone to the station to send another. Lord Averil linked his arm within George's, and they walked rapidly away through the snow that lay on the path.

Yes, he, the Viscount Averil, Peer of the Realm, linked his arm with George Godolphin's, who had so very near been held up to the virtuous British public as a candidate for a free passage to Australia. Somehow, George had slipped through that danger and was a gentleman still: moreover, he was Lord Averil's brother-in-law, and it was the earnest wish of that nobleman that general society should forget that little mistake in George's life as heartily as he did. He explained as he walked along: that Maria had got rapidly worse all at once; that it was only within a few hours that immediate danger had shown itself.

Still George could not understand it. He had left his wife, sick certainly, but not, as he believed, seriously ill; he had supposed her to be busy in her preparations for the voyage: and now to be told that she was dying! No, George could not understand it, and scarcely believed it. If this was so, why had Maria not sent for him before?

Lord Averil was unable to give him more explanatory information. It was only the evening before that Cecil had called upon her, called accidentally, and learned it, he said. It was only that morning, as Lord Averil had now heard, that Mr. Hastings and his family had learned it. Until that morning, nay, until an hour or two ago, Maria herself had not imagined the danger to be so near: and she heartily thanked Lord Averil for having had the forethought to telegraph.

"Snow must have known it," remonstrated George.

"I think not. I was talking to him to-day, and he expressed his surprise at the disorder's having suddenly increased in this rapid manner."

"What *is* the disorder?" asked George. "My wife had no disorder—except weakness."

"I suppose that is it—weakness."

"But weakness does not kill!"

"Yes, it does. Sometimes."

Margery was standing at the door when they reached the gate, possibly looking out for her master, for she knew the hours of the arrivals of the train. The windows of the sitting-room faced that way, and George's eyes naturally turned on them. But there was no sign of busy life, of every-day occupation, the curtains hung in their undisturbed folds, the blinds were partially down.

"I will just ask how your wife is now, and whether

Cecil is here," said Lord Averil, following George up the path.

No, Lady Averil and Miss Bessy Godolphin had left about ten minutes before, Margery said. My Lady Godolphin, who had driven up in her carriage and come in for a quarter of an hour, she had left; and Miss Rose Hastings, who had been there the best part of the morning, had also left. Mrs. George Godolphin seemed a trifle better, inclined to sleep, tired out, as it were; and she, Margery, didn't wonder at it with such a heap of visitors: she had give 'em a broad hint herself that her mistress might be all the better for an hour's quiet.

Lord Averil departed. George flung his railway-wrapper on a chair and hung his hat up in the little hall: he turned his face, one of severity then, on Margery.

"Is your mistress so very ill?"

"I don't see that she can be much worse, sir. When Mr. Snow went out just now he said she was better. She *is* better than she was in the morning, or she couldn't be sitting up."

"And now, Margery, why was I not sent for earlier? The blame must lie with you."

"I can't help it, sir: you must blame me if you will. Why, Mr. George," she continued, raising her voice in a tone of defence, "if I had had a thought that she was coming on to be like this, do you suppose I should not have sent? Yesterday morning, when she was worse, I said master ought to be writ to, and she said she'd write herself. She did write, but she didn't get it ready till evening, and my Lord Averil, he telegraphed. It is only this morning, sir, that downright danger has come on."

"She cannot be so very ill as they would imply; she

cannot be beyond hope!" he cried, in an impassioned tone.

"Well, sir, I don't know," answered Margery, willing perhaps to soften the facts to him by degrees, as Mrs. Clark had been by the telegraphic message. "She is certainly better than she was in the morning. She is sitting up."

George Godolphin was of a hopeful nature. Even those few words seemed to speak to his heart with a certainty. "Not there, sir," interposed Margery, as he opened the door of the sitting-room. "But it don't matter," she added: "you can go in that way."

He walked through the room and opened that of the bed-chamber. Would the scene ever leave his memory? The room was lighted more by the blaze of the fire than by the daylight, for curtains partially covered the windows and the winter's dreary afternoon was already merging into twilight. The bed was at the far end of the room, the dressing-table near it. The fire was on his right as he entered, and on a white-covered sofa, drawn before it, sat Maria. She was partially dressed, and wrapped in a light cashmere shawl; her cap was untied, and her face, shaded though it was by its brown hair, was all too visible in the reflection cast by the firelight.

Which was the most colourless—that face, or the white cover of the sofa? George Godolphin's heart stood still as he looked upon it and then bounded on with a rushing leap. Every shadow of hope had gone out of him.

Maria had not heard him, did not see him; he went in gently. By her side on the sofa lay Miss Meta, curled up into a ball and fast asleep, her hands and her golden curls on her mamma's knee. With George's

first step forward, Maria turned her sad sweet eyes towards him, and a faint cry of emotion escaped her lips.

Before she could stir or speak, George was with her, his protecting arms thrown round her, her face gathered to his breast. What a contrast it was! she so wan and fragile, so near the grave, he in all his manly strength, his fresh beauty. Miss Meta woke up, recognised her papa with a cry and much commotion, but Margery came in and carried her off, shutting the door behind her.

Her fair young face—too fair and young to die—was laid against her husband's; her feeble hand lay caressingly in his. The shock to George was very great; it almost seemed that he had already lost her; and the scalding tears, so rarely wrung from man, coursed down his cheeks and fell on her face.

“Don't grieve,” she whispered, the tears raining from her own eyes. “Oh, George, my husband, it is a bitter thing to part, but we shall meet again in heaven, and be together for ever. It has been so weary here; the troubles have been so great!”

He steadied his voice to speak. “The troubles have not killed you, have they, Maria?”

“Yes, I suppose it has been so. 'I did try and struggle against them, but—I don't know——Oh, George!” she broke out in a wailing tone of pain, “if I could but have got over them and lived!—if I could but have gone with you to your new home!”

George sat down on the sofa where Meta had been, and held her to him in silence. She could hear his heart beat; could feel it bounding against her side.

“It will be a better home in heaven,” she resumed, laying her poor pale face upon his shoulder. “You

will come to me there, George; I shall but go on first a little while: all the pains and the cares, the heart-burnings of earth will be forgotten, and we shall be together in happiness for ever and ever."

He dropped his face upon her neck, he sobbed aloud in his anguish. Whatever may have been his gracelessness and his faults, he had loved his wife; and now that he was losing her, that love was greater than it had ever been: some pricks of conscience may have been mingled with it, too! Who knows?

"Don't forget me quite when I am gone, George. Think of me sometimes as your poor wife who loved you to the last; who would have stayed with you if God had let her. When first I began to see that it must be, that I should leave you and Meta, my heart nearly broke; but the pain has grown less, and I think God has been reconciling me to it."

"What shall I do?—what will the child do without you?" broke from his quivering lips.

Perhaps the thought crossed Maria that he had done very well without her in the last few months, for his sojourns with her might be counted by hours instead of by days: but she was too generous to allude to it; and the heartaching had passed. "Cecil and Lord Averil will take Meta," she said. "Let her stay with them, George! It would not be well for her to go to India alone with you."

The words surprised him. He did not speak.

"Cecil proposed it yesterday. They will be *glad* to have her. I dare say Lord Averil will speak to you about it later. It was the one great weight left upon my mind, George—our poor child, and what could be done with her: Cecil's generous proposal removed it."

"Yes," said George, hesitatingly. "For a little

while ; perhaps it will be the best thing. Until I shall get settled in India, But she must come to me then ; I cannot part with her for good."

"For good ? No. But, George, you may—it is possible"—she seemed to stammer and hesitate—"you may be forming new ties. In that case you would care less for the loss of Meta——"

"Don't talk so !" he passionately interrupted. "How can you glance at such things, Maria, in these our last moments ?"

She was silent for a few minutes, weeping softly. "Had this parting come upon me as suddenly as it has upon you, I might have started from the very thought with horror ; but, George, I have had nothing else in my own mind for weeks but the parting, and it has made me look at the future as I could not else have looked at it. Do not blame me for saying this : I must allude to it, if I am to speak of Meta. I can understand how full of aversion the thought is to you now : but, George, it *may* come to pass."

"I think not," he said, and his voice and manner had changed to grave deliberation. "If I know anything of myself, Maria, I shall never again marry."

"It is not impossible."

"No," he assented ; "it is not impossible."

Her heart beat a shade quicker, and she hid her face upon him so that he could not see it. When she spoke again, it was with difficulty he could catch the whispered words.

"I know how foolish and wrong it is for a dying wife to extract any promise of this nature from her husband : were I to say to you, Do not again marry, it would be little else than a wicked request ; and it would prove how my thoughts and passions must still cling to earth.

Bear with me while I speak of this, George: *I* am not going to be so wicked: but—but——”

Agitation stopped her voice. Her bosom heaved, her breath nearly left her, and she had to catch it in gasps. He saw that this was mental emotion, not bodily weakness; and he waited until it should pass, stroking the hair from her brow with his gentle hand.

“My darling, what is it?”

“But there is one promise that I do wish to beg of you,” she resumed, mastering her emotion sufficiently to speak. “If—if you should marry, and your choice falls upon *one*—upon *her*—then, in that case, do not seek to have Meta home; let her remain always with Cecil.”

A pause: broken by George. “Of whom do you speak, Maria?”

The same labouring of the breath; the same cruel agitation; and they had to be fought with before she could bring out the words.

“Of Charlotte Pain.”

“Charlotte Pain!” echoed George, shouting out the name in surprise.

“I could not bear it,” she shivered. “George, George! do not make her the second mother of my child! I could not bear it; it seems to me that I could not even in my grave bear it! Should you marry her, promise me that Meta shall not be removed from Ashlydyat.”

“Maria,” he quietly said, “I shall never marry Charlotte Pain.”

“You don’t know. You may think now you will not, but you cannot answer for yourself. George! she has helped to kill me. She must not be Meta’s second mother.”

He raised her face so that he could see it: his dark-

blue eyes met hers searchingly, and he took her hand in his as he gravely spoke.

“She will never be Meta’s second mother: nay, if it will be more satisfactory, I will say she never shall be. By the heaven that perhaps even I may some day attain to, I say it! Charlotte Pain will never be Meta’s second mother, or my wife: and I affirm it in the presence of God.”

She did not answer in words. She only nestled a little nearer to him in gratitude; half in repentance perhaps for having doubted him. George resumed in the same grave tone:

“And now, Maria, tell me what you mean by saying that Charlotte Pain has helped to kill you.”

A crimson flush came over her wan face, and she contrived to turn it from him again, so that her eyes were hidden. But she did not speak quite at first.

“It all came upon me together, George,” she murmured at length, her tone one of loving tenderness, in token that she was not angry now; that the past, whatever may have been its sins against her, any or none, was forgiven. “At that cruel time when the blow fell, when I had nowhere to turn to for comfort, then I also learnt what Prior’s Ash had been saying, about—about Charlotte Pain. George, it seemed to wither my very heart; to take the life out of it. I had so loved you; I had so trusted you: and to find—to find—that you loved her, not me——”

“Hush!” thundered George, in his emotion. “I never *loved* any but you, Maria. I swear it!”

“Well—well. It seems that I do not understand. I—I could not get over it,” she continued, passing her hand across her brow where the old aching pain had come momentarily again, “and I fear it has helped to

kill me. It was so cruel, to have suffered me to know her all the while."

George Godolphin compressed his lips. He never spoke.

"But, George, it is over; it is buried in the past; and I did not intend to mention it. I should not have mentioned it but for speaking of Meta. Oh, let it go; let it pass: it need not disturb our last hour together."

"It appears to have disturbed you a great deal more than it need have done," he said, a shade of anger in his tone.

"Yes, looking back, I see it did. When we come to the closing scene of life, as I have come, this world shutting itself to our view, the next opening, then we see how foolish in many things we have been; how worse than vain our poor earthly passions. So to have fretted ourselves over this little space of existence with its passing follies, its temporary interests, when we might have been living and looking for that great one that shall last for ever! To gaze back on my life it seems but a little span; a worthless hour compared with the eternity that I am entering upon. Oh, George, we have all need of God's loving forgiveness! I, as well as you. I did not mean to reproach you: but I *could* not bear—had you made her your second wife—that she should have had the training of Meta."

Did George Godolphin doubt whether the fear was wholly erased from her heart? Perhaps so: or he might not have spoken to her as he was about to speak.

"Let me set your mind further at rest, Maria. Had I ever so great an inclination to marry Mrs. Pain, it is impossible that I could do so. Mrs. Pain has a husband already."

Maria raised her face, a flashing light, as of joy, illumining it. George saw it: and a sad, dreamy look of self-condemnation settled on his own. *Had* it so stabbed her? "Is she married again?—since she left Prior's Ash?"

"She has never been a widow, Maria," he answered. "Rodolf Pain, her husband, did not die."

"He did not die?"

"As it appears. He is now back again in England."

"And did you know of this?"

"Only since his return. I supposed her to be a widow, as everybody else supposed it. One night last summer, in quitting Ashlydyat, I came upon them both in the grounds, Mr. and Mrs. Pain; and I then learned to my very great surprise that he, whom his wife had passed off as dead, had in point of fact been in hiding abroad. There is some unpleasant mystery attached to it, the details of which I have not concerned myself to inquire into: he fell into trouble I expect, and feared his own country was too hot for him. However it may have been, he is home again, and with her. I suppose the danger is removed, for I met them together in Piccadilly last week walking openly, and they told me they were looking out for a house."

She breathed a sobbing sigh of relief, as one hears sometimes from a little child.

"But were Mrs. Pain the widow she assumed to be, she would never have been made my wife. Child!" he added, in momentary irritation, "don't you understand things better? *She* my wife!—the second mother, the trainer of Meta! What could you be thinking of? Men do not marry women such as Charlotte Pain."

"Then you do not care for her so very much?"

"I care for her so much, Maria, that were I never to

see her or hear of her again it would not give me one moment's thought," he impulsively cried. "I'd give a great deal now not to have kept up our acquaintance with the woman—if that had saved you one single iota of pain."

When these earthly scenes are closing,—when the grave is about to set its seal on one to whom we could have saved pain, and did not,—when heaven's solemn approach is to be seen, and heaven's purity has become all too clear to our own sight, what would *we* give to change inflicted wrongs—to blot out the hideous past! George Godolphin sat by the side of his dying wife, his best-beloved in life as she would be in death, and bit his lips in his crowd of memories, in his unavailing repentance. Ah, my friends! these moments of reprisal, prolonged as they may seem, must come to us in the end. It is a convenient thing no doubt to ignore them in our hot-blooded carelessness, but the time will come when they find us out.

He, George Godolphin, had leisure to hug them to himself, and make the best and the worst of them. Maria, exhausted with the excitement, as much as by her own state of weakness, closed her eyes as she lay upon his breast and dropped into a sleep, and he sat watching her face, holding her to him, not daring to move lest he should disturb her, not daring even to lift a finger and wipe off his own bitter and unavailing tears.

Yes, there could be no doubt of the fact—that the troubles of one kind and another had been too much for her; that she was dying of them; and he felt the truth to his heart's core. He felt that she, that delicate, refined, sensitive woman had been the very last who should have been treated rudely. You may remember

it was observed at the beginning of her history that she was one unfit to battle with the world's sharp storms—it had now proved so. Charlotte Pain would have braved them, whatever their nature, have weathered them jauntily on a prancing saddle-horse; Maria had shrunk down, crushed with their weight. Il y a—let me once more repeat it—il y a des femmes et des femmes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GRACE AKEMAN'S REPENTANCE.

THERE came one with hurried steps up the garden path, with hurried steps and a distressed, anxious countenance : passing Margery in the passage, passing Meta, she bore on as if no power on earth should stop her, and entered the sick chamber.

It was Grace, Mrs. Akeman. This sudden change in the illness of Maria had certainly come at an inopportune time : Mrs. Hastings was out for a week, Grace had gone out for the day with her husband some miles into the country. A messenger was sent to her, and it brought her home.

It brought her home with a self-condemning conscience. Maria dying!—when Grace had only thought of her as going flaunting off to India ; when she had that very day remarked to her husband, as they drove along the snowy road in his four-wheeled chaise stuffed full behind with architectural plans, that some people had all the luck of it in this world, and that Mr. and Mrs. George Godolphin, she supposed, would soon be swaying it in the Bengal presidency, as they had swayed it in Prior's Ash. Maria dying ! dying of the trouble, the sorrow, the disgrace, the humiliation, the neglect !

dying of a broken heart ! It came flashing into Grace Akeman's mind that she *might* have taken a different view of her conduct ; have believed in the wrongs of wives, who are bound to their husbands for worse as well as for better ; it came into her mind that she might have accorded her a little sisterly sympathy instead of reproach.

She came in now, brimming over with repentance ; she came in with a sort of belief that things could not have gone so very far ; that there must be some remedy still, some hope ; and that if she, Grace, exerted her energies to arouse Maria, health and life would come again. It was terrible ill-luck which had taken her out of Prior's Ash that particular day : Mr. Akeman had told her she had better not accompany him as the snow had come, but she had laid her plans previously to go, and Grace was one to take her own will. And so, what with the tardiness of the messenger, and what with the snow, the evening shades were over the earth before she got back to Prior's Ash.

Maria had awoke out of her temporary slumber then, and George was standing with his arm on the mantelpiece. A half-frown crossed his brow when he saw Grace enter. He had never liked her ; he was conscious that she had not been kind to Maria, and he deemed her severe manner and tart voice scarcely suitable to that dying chamber. But she was his wife's sister, and he advanced to welcome her.

Grace did not see his welcome ; would not see it. Perhaps in truth she was wholly absorbed by the sight which met her view in Maria. Remedy still ?—hope yet ? Ah no ! death was there, was upon her, and Grace burst into tears. Maria held out her hand, a smile lighting up her wan countenance.

"I thought you were not coming to see me, Grace."

"I was out; I went to Hamlet's Wood this morning with Mr. Akeman," sobbed Grace. "Whatever is the reason that you have suddenly grown so ill as this?"

"I have been growing ill a long time," was Maria's answer.

"But there must be hope!" said Grace, in her quick way. "Mr. George Godolphin"—turning to him and dashing away the tears on her cheeks, as if she would not betray them to *him*—"surely there must be hope! What do the medical men say?"

"There is no hope, Grace," interposed Maria, in her low, feeble voice. "The medical men know there is not. Dr. Beale came with Mr. Snow at mid-day; but their coming at all is a mere form now."

Grace untied her bonnet and sat down. "I thought," said she, "you were getting well."

Maria made a slight motion of dissent. "I have not thought it myself; not really thought it. I hoped it might be so, and the hope prevented my speaking; but there was always an under-current of conviction to the contrary in my heart."

George looked at her, half-reproachfully. She understood the look, and answered it.

"I wish now I had told you, George: but I was not sure. And if I had spoken you would only have laughed at me then in disbelief."

"You speak very calmly, Maria," said Grace, with passionate earnestness. "Have you no regret at leaving us?"

A faint hectic shone suddenly in Maria's cheek. "Regret!" she repeated with emotion, "my days have been one long regret; one long, wearying pain. Don't you see it is the pain that has killed me, Grace? But

it is over now, through God's mercy," she added, in a calmer tone. "The bitterness of death has passed."

Grace's temper was sharp: her sense of right and wrong cynically keen: the rector had had the same sharp temper in his youth, but he had learned to control it; Grace had not. She turned her flashing eyes, her flaming cheeks, on George Godolphin.

"Do you hear?—the pain has killed her. Who brought that pain upon her? Mr. George Godolphin, I wish you joy of your conscience! I almost seemed to foresee it—I almost seemed to foresee this," she passionately cried, "ere ever my sister married you."

"Don't, Grace!" wailed Maria, a faint cry of fear escaping her; a sudden terror taking possession of her raised face. "George, George!"

She held out her hands yearningly to him, as if she would shield him, or as if she wanted him to shield her from the sharp words. George crossed over to her with his protecting presence, and bent to catch her whisper, praying him for peace.

"You forget your sister's state when you thus speak, Mrs. Akeman," he gravely said. "Say anything you please to me later; you shall have the opportunity if you desire it; but in my wife's presence there must be peace."

Grace flung off the shawl which she had worn, and stood beating the toe of her foot upon the fender, her throat swelling, her chest heaving with the effort of subduing her emotion. What with her anger in the past, her grief in the present, she had well-nigh burst into shrieking sobs.

"I think I could drink some tea," said Maria. "Could we not have it together; here; for the last time? You will make it, Grace."

Poor, weak, timid heart! Perhaps she only so spoke as an incentive to keep that "peace" for which she tremblingly yearned; which was essential to her, as to all, in her dying hour. George rang the bell and Margery came in.

It was done as she seemed to wish. The small round table was drawn to the fire, and Grace sat at it, making the tea. Maria turned her face and asked for Meta: Margery answered that she was coming in by-and-by. Very little was said. George drew a chair near Maria and leaned upon the arm of the sofa. The tea, so far as she went, was a superfluous mockery: George put a teaspoonful in her mouth, but she with difficulty swallowed it, and shook her head when he would have given her more. It did not seem to be much else than a mockery for the others: Grace's tears dropped into hers, and George suffered his to get cold and then swallowed it at a draught, as if it was a relief to get rid of it. Margery was called again to take the things away, and Maria, who was leaning back on the sofa with closed eyes, asked again for Meta to come in.

Then Margery had to confess that Miss Meta was not at home to come in. She had gone out visiting. The facts of the case were these. Lord Averil, after quitting the house, had returned to it to say a word to George which he had forgotten: but finding George had gone into his wife's room, he would not let him be disturbed. It was just at the moment that Margery had carried out Meta, and the young lady was rather restive at the proceedings, crying loudly.

"What is the grievance, Meta?" asked his lordship.

"The grievance is just this—that because it's necessary to keep a quiet house to-day, she's making it a noisy one," said Margery, explosively. "Twice that I

have brought her out of the room she has roared out like this. She can't be in there every moment, fit or unfit, as my lord knows."

Lord Averil looked up at the skies. They were dreary enough, but still not so bad as they had been, and a little bit of blue was struggling forth in the wintry afternoon. "It will not snow again yet," said Lord Averil. "Let me take her up for an hour or two to Ashlydyat. Will you come, Meta, and see Aunt Cecil?"

Meta looked at him, her large eyes full of tears. "Mamma's going to die. I want to stop with her."

"Poor little orphan!" he murmured to himself, stroking her golden curls. "I will bring you back to mamma very soon, Meta," he said, aloud. "She had better come, Margery; it will be a change for her, and keep the house quiet for the time."

Meta, soothed probably by the promise of being brought back soon, made no opposition, and Margery without the least ceremony took down a woollen shawl and her garden-hat that were hanging on the pegs, and enveloped her in them. "They'll do as well as getting out her best things, my lord, if you won't mind 'em: and it'll be dusk a'most by the time you get to Ashlydyat."

It was quite the same to Lord Averil, whether the young lady was bundled up as she was now, or decked out in a lace frock and crinoline. He led her down the path, talking pleasantly; but Meta's breath was caught up incessantly with sobbing sighs. Her heart was full, imperfect as her idea of the calamity overshadowing her necessarily was.

Thus it happened that Miss Meta was not at hand when Maria asked for her. Whether it was from this,

or from causes wholly unconnected with it, in a short while Maria grew restless : restless as it seemed both in body and mind, and it was deemed advisable that she should not sit up longer.

“Go for Meta while they get me into bed, George,” she said to him. “I want her to be near me.”

He went out at once. But he did not immediately turn to Ashlydyat : with hasty steps he took the road to Mr. Snow’s. There had been a yearning on George Godolphin’s mind ever since he first saw his wife in the afternoon, to put the anxious question to one or both of the medical men : “Can nothing be done to prolong her life, even for the shortest space ?”

Mr. Snow was out : the surgery boy did not know where : “Paying visits,” he supposed, and George turned his steps to Dr. Beale’s, who lived now in Prior’s Ash, though he had not used to live in it. Dr. Beale’s house was ablaze with light, and Dr. Beale was at home, the servant said, but he had a dinner-party.

How the words seemed to grate on his ear ! A dinner-party !—gaiety, lights, noise, mirth, eating and toast-drinking, when his wife was dying ! But the next moment his reflection came to him : the approaching death of a patient is not wont to cast its influence on a physician’s private life.

He demanded to see Dr. Beale in spite of the dinner-party. George Godolphin forgot recent occurrences, exacting still the deference paid to him all his life, when Prior’s Ash had bowed down to the Godolphins. He was shown into a room, and Dr. Beale came out to him.

But the doctor, though he would willingly have smoothed matters to him, could not give him hope. George asked for the truth, and he got it—that his

wife's life now might be counted by hours. He went out and proceeded towards Ashlydyat, taking the near way down Crosse-street, by the bank—the bank that once was: it would lead him through the dull Ash-tree walk with its ghostly story; but what cared George Godolphin?

Did a remembrance of the past come over him as he glanced up at the bank's well-known windows?—a remembrance that pricked him with its sharp sting? He need never have left that house; but for his own recklessness, folly, wickedness—call it what you will—he might have been in it still, one of the honoured Godolphins, heir to Ashlydyat, his wife well and happy by his side. Now!—he went striding on with wide steps, and he took off his hat and raised his burning brow to the keen night air. You may leave the house behind you, George Godolphin, and so put it out of your sight, but you cannot put out memory.

Grace had remained with Maria. She was in bed now, but the restlessness seemed to continue. “I want Meta; I want Meta.”

“Dear Maria, your husband has but just gone for her,” breathed Grace. “But she will soon be here.”

It seemed to satisfy her. She lay still, looking upwards, her breath, or Mrs. Akeman fancied it, getting shorter. Grace, hot tears blinding her eyes, bent forward to kiss her wasted cheek.

“Maria, I was very harsh with you,” she whispered. “I feel it now. I can only pray God to forgive me. I loved you always, and when that dreadful trouble came, I felt angry for your sake: I said unkind things to you and of you, but in the depth of my heart there lay the pain and the anger because you suffered. Will *you* forgive me?”

She raised her feeble hand and laid it lovingly on the cheek of Grace. "There is nothing to forgive, Grace," she murmured: "what are our poor little offences one against the other? Think how much Heaven has to forgive us all. Oh, Grace, I am going to it! I am going away from care."

Grace stood up to dash away her tears; but they came faster and faster. "I would ask you to let me atone to you, Maria," she sobbed—"I would ask you to let me welcome Meta to our home. We are not rich, but we have enough for comfort, and I will try to bring her up a good woman; I will love her as my own child."

"She goes to Cecil." There was no attempt at thanks in words—Maria was growing beyond it; nothing but the fresh touch of the hand's loving pressure. And that relaxed with the next moment and fell upon the bed.

Grace felt somewhat alarmed. She cleared the mist from her eyes and bent them steadily on Maria's face. It seemed to have changed. "Do you feel worse?" she softly asked.

Maria opened her lips, but no sound came from them. She attempted to point with her finger to the door; she then threw her eyes in the same direction; but why or what she wanted it was impossible to tell. Grace, her heart beating wildly, flew across the little hall to the kitchen.

"Oh, Margery, I think she is sinking! Come you and see."

Margery hastened in. Her mistress evidently *was* sinking, and was conscious of it. The eager, anxious look upon her face and her raised hand proved that she was wanting something.

“Is it my master?—Is it the child?” cried Margery, bending over her. “They won’t be long, ma’am.”

It was Margery’s habit to soothe the dying, even if she had to do it at some little expense of veracity. She knew that her master could not go to Ashlydyat and be home just yet: she did not know of his visits to the houses of the doctors; but if she had known it she would equally have said, “They won’t be long.”

But the eager look continued on Maria’s face, and it became evident to experienced Margery that her master and Meta were not the anxious point. Maria’s lips moved, and Margery bent her ear.

“Papa! Is it time?”

“It’s the Sacrament she’s thinking of,” whispered Margery to Mrs. Akeman: “or else that she wants to take her leave of him. The rector was to come at eight o’clock; he told me so when he called in again this afternoon. What is to be done, ma’am?”

“And it is only half-past six! We must send to him at once.”

Margery seemed in some uncertainty. “Shall you be afraid to stay here alone, ma’am, if I go?”

“Why! where is Jean?”

Jean, one of the old servants of Ashlydyat, discharged with the rest when the bankruptcy had come, but now in service there again under Lord and Lady Averil, had been with Margery all day. She had now been sent out by the latter for certain errands wanted in the town.

A tremor came over Mrs. Akeman at Margery’s question, as to whether she should be afraid to stay there alone. To one not accustomed to it, it does require peculiar courage to remain with the dying. But Grace could call up a brave spirit by dint of will, and

she no longer hesitated, when she saw the continued eager look on her sister's face.

"Make you haste, Margery. I shan't mind. Mrs. James is in the house and I can call her if I see a necessity. Margery!"—following her outside the door to whisper it—"do you see that strange look in her face? Is it *death*?"

She was shaking all over, as she spoke, in nervous trepidation. It was to be a memorable night, that, what with one emotion and another, in the memory of Grace Akeman. Margery's answer was characteristic.

"It does look like it, ma'am; but I have seen 'em like this, and then rally again. Anyhow it can't be far off. Mrs. Akeman, it seems to me that all the good ones be leaving the world. First Mr. Godolphin, and now her!"

Margery had scarcely been gone five minutes when Lord Averil came back with Meta. They had not met George. It was not likely that they had, seeing that he was going to Ashlydyat by a different route. In point of fact, at that moment George was about turning into Crosse-street, passing his old house with those enlivening reminiscences of his. Grace explained why she was alone, and Lord Averil took off his hat and great-coat to remain.

Maria asked for him. He went up to the bed and she smiled at him and moved her hand. Lord Averil took it between his, the tears gathering in his earnest eyes as he saw the change in her.

"She has been as happy as possible with us all the evening," he gently said, alluding to the child. "We will do all we can for her always."

"Tell Cecil—to bring—her up—for God."

She must have revived a little or she could not have spoken the words. By-and-by, Margery was heard to enter, and Grace went out to her. The woman was panting with the speed she had made.

"I run on first, ma'am, but the parson is on his way. If you'll please to tell my mistress, I'll make ready for him. Is she as bad now?"

"Scarcely, I think. She has been speaking to Lord Averil. Who's this? Oh, it's Jean."

As the Reverend Mr. Hastings approached the gate he saw a man leaning over it, in the light cast by the white snow of the winter's night. It was David Jekyl.

"I thought I'd ask how the young missis was, sir, as I went home, but it might be disturbing of 'em to go right up to the door," he said, drawing back to make way for the rector. "It were said in the town, as I come along, that she were worse."

"Yes, David, she is worse; as ill as she can be. I have just had a message."

David twirled his grey beaver hat awkwardly round on his hand, stroking its napless surface with his other arm. He did not raise his eyes as he spoke to the rector.

"Might be, you'd just say a word to her about that money, sir, asking of her not to let it worry her mind. It's said as them things *have* worried her more nor need be. If you could say a word for us, sir, that we don't think of it no more, it might comfort her like."

"The trouble for her has passed, David: to say this to her might bring her thoughts back to it. Heaven is opening to her, earth is closing. Thank you for your thoughtfulness."

The Reverend Mr. Hastings continued his way slowly up the garden path, whence the snow had been swept

away. Illness was upon him and he could not walk quickly. It was a dull night, and yet there was that peculiar light in the atmosphere, often seen when the earth is covered with snow. The door was held open, awaiting him; and the minister uncovered his head, and stepped in with his solemn greeting:

“PEACE BE TO THIS HOUSE, AND TO ALL THAT DWELL IN IT!”

There could be no waiting for George Godolphin: the spirit might be on its wing. They gathered in the room, Grace, and Margery, and Viscount Averil: and, the stillness broken only by the sobs of Grace, Mr. Hastings administered the last rite of our religion to his dying child.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAST.

BREATHE softly, tread gently, for it is the chamber of the dying! The spirit is indeed on its wing, hovering on the very isthmus which separates time from eternity.

A small shaded lamp throws its subdued light upon the room, blending with the more ruddy hue cast by the fire. The white, wan face of Maria Godolphin lies quietly on the not more white pillow—but that pillow has not the ghastly blue tinge in it which may be seen on the face. Her breath comes in short gasps, and may be heard at a distance; otherwise she is calm and still, the sweet soft eyes are open yet, and the world and its interests, so far as cognizance goes, has not closed. Meta, in her black frock, dressed as she had been in the day, is lying on the bed by her mother's side: one weak arm is thrown round the child, as if she could not part with her greatest earthly treasure; and George is sitting in a chair on the other side the bed, his elbow on the pillow, his face turned to catch every shade that may appear on that fading one, so soon to be lost to him for ever.

The silence was interrupted by the striking of the house-clock; twelve: and its strokes came through the

doors of the room with preternatural loudness in the hushed stillness of the midnight. Margery glided in. Margery and Jean were keeping watch over the fire in the next room, the sitting-room, ready for any services required of them: and they knew that services for the dead as well as for the living would be wanted that night.

The doctors had paid a last visit, superfluous as they knew it to be. Dr. Beale had come with the departure of his dinner guests; Mr. Snow earlier in the evening: she was dying, they said, dying quickly; but calmly and peacefully: and those friends who had wished to take their farewell had taken it ere they left the house, leaving her, as she wished, alone with her husband.

Margery came in with a noiseless step. If Margery had come in once upon the same errand which brought her now, she had come in ten times. Maria turned her eyes towards her.

“She’d be a sight better in bed. It have gone midnight. It can’t do no good, her lying there.”

Meta partially stirred her golden curls as she moved nearer to her mother, and Maria’s feeble hand tightened its clasp on the little one. George nodded; and Margery went back rather in dudgeon, and gave the fire in the next room a fierce poke.

“It’s not *well* to let her see a mortal die. Just you hold your tongue, Jean, about mother and child! Don’t I know it’s parting them?—but the parting *must* come, and before another hour is over; and I say it would be better to bring her away now. If there should be anything of a struggle at the last, a fighting for breath, the child will never get it out of her sight. Master has no more sense than a calf, or he’d think of this and send her. Not he! He just gave me one of his looks, as

much as to say, 'You be off back; she isn't coming.' 'Tisn't him that would think of it."

"How does she seem now?" asked Jean, a tall woman, with a thin straight-down figure, and old-fashioned large white cap.

"I saw no change. There won't be any till the minute comes."

On the table was a tray of cups and saucers. Margery went up to them and drew two from the rest. "We may as well have a drop o' tea now," she said, taking up a small black teapot that was standing on the hob—for the parlour grate was an old-fashioned one. "Shall I cut you a bit o' bread-and-butter, Jean?"

"No thank ye. I couldn't eat it."

They sat on either side the table, the teacups between them. Margery put the teapot back on the hob. Jean stirred her tea noiselessly.

"I have known those, as far gone as she, rally for hours," Jean remarked, in a half whisper.

Margery shook her head. "*She* won't rally. It'll be only the working out of my dream. I dreamt last night——"

"Don't get talking of dreams now, Margery," interrupted Jean, with a shiver. "I never like to bring dreams up when the dead be about."

Margery cast a resentful glance at her. "Jean, woman, if you have laughed at my dreams once, you have laughed at 'em a hundred times when we lived together at Ashlydyat, ridiculing and saying you never could believe in such things. You know you have."

"No more I don't believe in 'em," said Jean, taking little sips of her hot tea. "But it's not a pleasant subject for to-night."

"It's as pleasant as any other," retorted Margery.

“One can’t be clavering over dancing and fiddling when there’s a poor lady that one has loved dying within earshot. A good mistress she has been to me! and she’ll be a loss to more than one, mark you that, Jean.”

“The child is to come to the old home, they say, to be brought up by my lady.”

Margery grunted. “She’ll do her best, no doubt, Miss Cecil will, but the likeliest woman going can’t replace a mother. My master, *he’ll* find out her worth and her loss when she is gone.”

“I never heard that he didn’t know her worth before.”

“Didn’t you!” retorted Margery. “He’s all of a piece, he is. To think of his keeping that child in there now!”

“Shall we have you at Ashlydyat again, Margery?”

“Now don’t you bother your head about me, Jean, woman. Is it a time to cast one’s thoughts about and lay out plans? Let the future take care of the future.”

Jean remained silent after this rebuff and attended to her tea, which she could not get of a sufficient coolness to drink comfortably. She had been an inferior servant to Margery at Ashlydyat, in a measure under her control; and she was deferent in manner still. Presently she began again.

“It’s a curious complaint that your mistress has died of, Margery. Leastways it has a curious name. I made bold to ask Dr. Beale to-night what it was, when I went to open the gate for him, and he called it—what was it?—atrophy. Atrophy: that was it. They could not at all class the disease of which Mrs. George Godolphin had died, he said, and were content to call it atrophy for want of a better name. I took leave to say that I

didn't understand the word, and he explained that it meant a gradual wasting away of the system without apparent cause."

Margery did not reply for the moment: she was swelling with displeasure.

"I'd not speak of a lady as dead, until she was dead, if I were you, Jean Nair!"

"But you know what I mean," said Jean, humbly. "Margery, what *is* atrophy, for I don't understand it a bit?"

"It's rubbish," flashed Margery—"as applied to my poor dear mistress. She has died of the trouble—that she couldn't speak of—that has eat into her heart and cankered there—and broke it at the last. Atrophy! but them doctors must put a name to everything. Jean, woman, I have been with her all through it, and I tell you that it's the *trouble* that has killed her. She has had it on all sides, has felt it in more ways than the world gives her credit for. She never opened her lips to me about a thing—and perhaps it had been better if she had—but I have got my eyes in my head, and I could see what it was doing for her. As I lay down in my clothes on this here sofa last night, for it wasn't up to my bed I went, with her so ill, I couldn't help thinking to myself that if she could but have broke the ice and talked of her sorrows they might have wore off in time. It is the burying the grief within people's own breasts that kills them."

Jean was silent. Margery began turning the grounds in her empty teacup round and round, staring dreamily at the forms they assumed.

"Hark!" cried Jean.

A sound was heard in the next room. Margery started from her chair and softly opened the door. But

it was only her master who had gone round the bed and was leaning over Meta. Margery closed the door again.

George had come to the conclusion that the child would be best in bed. Meta was lying perfectly still, looking earnestly at her mamma's face, so soon, so soon to be lost to her. He drew the hiding hair from her brow as he spoke.

"You will be very tired, Meta. I think you must go to bed."

For answer Meta broke into a storm of passionate sobs. It was as if they had been on the burst before and the words had set them on. She flung up her little plump arms and held on to her mother, fearful perhaps of being forced away. Maria turned her eyes imploringly on her husband. Her speech seemed to return to her.

"Don't part us, George. It will be such a little while!"

He went back to his seat. He took his wife's hand in his, he bent his repentant face near to hers: it went to his very heart that she should suppose he wished to *part* them—but some such idea as Margery's had occurred to his mind. Meta's sobs subsided, but they had roused Maria from her passive silence.

"Meta—darling"—came forth the isolated words in the difficulty of her laboured breath—"I am going away, but it is not long before you will come to me. You will be sure to come to me, for God has promised. I seem to have had the promise given to me, to hold it, now, and I shall carry it away with me. I am going to heaven. When the blind was drawn up yesterday morning and I saw the snow, it made me shiver, but I said there will be no snow in heaven. Meta, there will

be only spring there; no sultry heat of summer, no keen winter's cold. Oh, my child! try to come to me, try always! I shall keep a place for you."

The minutes went on: the spirit fleeting, George watching with his aching heart. Soon she spoke again.

"Has it struck twelve?"

"Ten minutes ago."

"Then it is my birthday. I am twenty-eight to-day. It is young to die!"

Young to die! Yes, it was young to die: but there are some who can count time by sorrow, not by years.

"Don't grieve, George. It will pass so very soon, and you will come to me. Clad in our white robes, we shall rise at the Last Day to eternal life, and be together for ever and for ever."

The tears were dropping from his eyes. The grief of the present, the anguish of the parting, the remorse for the irrevocable past, in which he might have cherished her more tenderly had he foreseen this, and did not, were all too present to him. He laid his face on hers with a bitter cry.

"Forgive me before you go! Oh my darling, forgive me all!"

There was no answering response, nothing but the feeble pressure of her hand as it held him there, and he started up to look at her. Ah no: there could never more be any response from those fading lips, never more, never more.

Was the hour come? George Godolphin's heart beat quicker, and he wildly kissed her with passionate kisses—as if that would keep within her the life that was ebbing. The loving eyes gazed at him still—it was he who had the last lingering look, not Meta.

But she was not to die just then: life was longer in

finally departing. George, greedily watching her every breath, praying (who knows?) wild and unavailing prayers to heaven that even yet a miracle might be wrought and she spared to him, supported her head on his arm. And the minutes went on and on.

Meta was very still. Her sobs had first subsided into a sudden catching of the breath now and then, but that was no longer heard. Maria moved uneasily, or strove to move, and looked up at George in distress; dying though she was, almost past feeling, the weight of the child's head had grown heavy on her side. He understood and went round to move Meta.

She had fallen asleep. Weary with the hour, the excitement, the still watching, the sobs, sleep had stolen unconsciously over her: her wet eyelashes were closed, her breathing was regular, her hot cheeks were crimson. "Shall I take her to Margery?" he whispered.

Maria seemed to look approval, but her eyes followed the child as George raised her in his arms. It was impossible to mistake their yearning wish.

He carried the child round, he gently held her sleeping face to that of his wife, and the dying mother pressed her last feeble kiss upon the unanswering and unconscious lips. Then he took her and gave her to Margery.

The tears were in Maria's eyes when he returned to her, and he bent his face to catch the words that were evidently striving to be spoken.

"Love her always, George."

"Oh, my darling, there is no need to tell it me!"

The answer seemed to have burst from him in anguish. There is no doubt that those few last hours had been of the bitterest anguish to George Godolphin: he had never gone through such before—he never would go

through such again. It is well, it is well that these moments can come but once in a lifetime.

He hung over her, suppressing his emotion as he best could for her sake ; he wiped the death-dews from her brow, fast gathering there. Her eyes never moved from him, her fingers to the last sought to entwine themselves with his. But soon the loving expression of those eyes faded into unconsciousness : they were open still, looking, as may be said, afar off : the recognition of him, her husband, the recollection of earthly things had passed away.

Suddenly there was a movement of the lips, a renewal in a faint degree of strength and energy ; and George strove to catch the words. Her voice was dreamy ; her eyes looked dreamily at him whom she would never more recognise until they should both have put on immortality.

“And the city has no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it : for the glory of God lightens it, and the Lamb is the light——”

Even as she was speaking the last words her voice dropped, and was still. There was no sigh, there was no struggle ; had Meta been looking on, the child's pulses would not have been stirred. Very, very gently had the spirit taken its flight.

George Godolphin let his head fall on the pillow beside her. In his overwhelming grief for her ? or in repentant prayer for himself ? He alone knew. Let us leave it with him !

CHAPTER XXV.

OVER THE DEAD.

ONCE more, once more—I cannot help it if you blame me for relating these things—the death-bell of All Souls’ boomed out over Prior’s Ash. People were rising in the morning when it struck upon their ear, and they held their breath to listen: three times *two*, and then the quick sharp strokes rung for the recently departed. Then it was for her who was known the previous night to be on the point of death! and they went out of their houses in the bleak winter’s morning, and said to each other, as they took down their shutters, that poor Mrs. George Godolphin had really gone at last.

Poor Mrs. George Godolphin! Ay, they could speak of her considerately, kindly, regretfully now, but did they remember how they had once spoken of her? She had gone to the grave with her pain and sorrow—she had gone with the remembrance of their severe judgment, their harsh words, which had eaten into her too sensitive heart: she had gone away from them, to be judged by One who would be more merciful than they had been.

“Oh, if we could but be less harsh in judging our fellow-pilgrims! I have told you no idle tale, no false

story conjured up by the plausible imagination. Prior's Ash lamented her in a startled sort of manner: their consciences pricked them sorely; and they would have given something to recall her back to life, now it was too late.

They stared at each other, shutters in hand, stunned as it were, with blank faces and repentant hearts. Somehow they had never believed she would really die; even the day before, when it had been talked of as all too probable, they had not fully believed it: she was young and beautiful, and it is not common for such to go. They recalled her in the several stages of her life: their rector's daughter, the pretty child who had been born and reared among them, the graceful girl who had given her love to George Godolphin, the most attractive man in Prior's Ash; the faithful, modest wife, against whose fair fame never a breath of scandal had dared to come; the loving mother, the gentle friend, the kind mistress, the considerate woman—Prior's Ash looked out around, and in its present mood found none so admirable in all the relations of life, as she appeared to have been for whom that bell was tolling.

And how had they requited her? When misfortune, such as does not often fall upon a gentlewoman, overtook her, bursting upon her unconscious head as a hasty-gathered thunder-storm in sultry summer, they had reproached *her*; had cast towards her their bitter sneers, had not sought to conceal their unjust reproaches: many a one who had not lost by the bank, who had never had a shilling in it, had sent forth cruel stabs more freely than the rest. Did they think in their heart of hearts that she *deserved* such?—did they think such poisoned arrows could fall harmlessly on a refined, sensitive woman such as she was?

It was all over now: she and her broken heart, her wrongs and her sorrows, had been taken from their tender mercies to a land where neither wrongs nor sorrows can penetrate—where the hearts, broken here by unkindness, are made whole. It was a better change for her; but Prior's Ash felt it remorsefully. They felt it in a resentful sort of manner when the first shock was over; as if a wrong had been done to them in her going away so soon, in her not stopping longer, that they, in their own fashion, might have atoned for their share of the past, had it been but by a single word. This sort of atoning—or rather the wish to render it—generally comes too late.

When Meta woke in the morning it was considerably beyond her usual hour, the result probably of her late vigil. Jean was in the room, not Margery. A moment's surprised stare, and then recollection flashed over her. She darted out of bed, her flushed cheeks and her bright eyes raised to Jean.

“I want mamma.”

“Yes, dear,” said Jean, evasively. “I'll dress you, and then you shall go down.”

“Where's Margery?”

“She has just stepped out on an errand.”

Meta paused a moment, looking very hard at Jean. For all her random ways, her high spirits, she inherited very greatly the thoughtful mind, the reflective temperament of her mother; she had inherited that sensitive reticence of feeling which had so remarkably distinguished George Godolphin's wife. Where Meta's feelings were engaged, she was silent, shy, timid as a hare. She possessed, of course, no definite idea of death; she had seen her baby brother in his coffin, but the sight did not impart any defined notions to her:

had one questioned Meta of that scene, she would have remembered the flowers strewn on the little white shroud, more clearly than anything else: and when she had gathered, as she had on the previous day, that death was also coming to mamma, a vague sense of discomfort, of a desire to hold her mamma tightly and not let her go, was the most that her mind had grasped. But the sense of discomfort, of something wrong, returned to her mind when she awoke, the vague fear touching her mother rushed over it with redoubled violence, and she drew away from the hand of Jean, who was about to take hold of her.

“Is mamma in her room? Is she in her bed?”

“We’ll go and see presently, dear,” repeated Jean, with the same evasion.

The worst way that any one can take is to attempt to deceive a thoughtful, sensitive child, whose fears may be already awakened: it is certain to defeat its own ends. Meta knew as well as Jean did that she was being purposely deceived, that there was something to tell which was not being told. A dread came over Meta that her mamma was in some manner gone out of the house, that she should never see her again: she backed from Jean’s hand, dashed the door open, and flew down the stairs. Jean flew after her, crying and calling.

The noise surprised George Godolphin. He was in the parlour at the breakfast-table, sitting at the meal but not touching it. The consternation of Prior’s Ash was great, but that was as nothing in comparison with his. George Godolphin was as a man bewildered. He could not realise the fact. But four-and-twenty hours since he had received intimation of the danger, and now she was—there. He could not realise it. Though all

yesterday afternoon, since his arrival, he had known there was no hope,—though he had seen her die,—though he had passed the hours since, lamenting her as much as he could do in his first stunned state, yet he could not realise it. He was not casting much blame to himself: he was thinking how circumstances had worked against him and against Maria. His mind was yet in a chaos, and it was from this confused state that the noise outside disturbed him. Opening the door, the sight came full upon his view. The child flying down in her white night-dress, her naked feet scarcely touching the stairs, her eyes wild, her hot cheeks flaming, her golden hair entangled as she had slept.

“I want mamma,” she cried, literally springing into his arms as if for refuge. “Papa, I want mamma.”

She burst into a storm of sobs distressing to hear; she clung to him, her little arms, her whole frame trembling. George, half unmanned, sat down before the fire, and pressed her to him in his strong arms.

“Bring a shawl,” he said to Jean.

A warm grey shawl of chenille which Maria had often lately worn upon her shoulders was found by Jean, and George wrapped it round Meta as she lay in his arms, and he kept her there. Had Margery been present, she would probably have taken the young lady away by force and dressed her with a reprimand; but there was only Jean: and George had it all his own way.

He tried to comfort the grieved spirit; the little sobbing bosom that beat against his; but his efforts seemed useless, and the child’s cry never ceased.

“I want mamma; I want to see mamma.”

“Hush, Meta! Mamma”—George had to pause, himself—“mamma’s gone. She—”

The words confirmed all her fears, and she strove to

get off his lap in her excitement, interrupting his words. "Let me go and see her, papa! Is she in the grave with Uncle Thomas? Oh, let me go and see it! Grandpapa will show it to me."

How long it took to soothe her even to comparative calmness, George scarcely knew. He learnt more of Meta's true nature in that one interview than he had learnt in all her life before: and he saw that he must, in that solemn hour, speak to her as he would to a girl of double her years.

"Mamma's gone to heaven, child; she is gone to be an angel with the great God. She would have stayed with us if she could, Meta, but death came and took her. She kissed you; she kissed you, Meta, with her last breath. You were fast asleep: you fell asleep by her side, and I held you to mamma for her last kiss, and soon after that she died."

Meta had kept still, listening: but now the sobs broke out again.

"Why didn't they wake me and let me see her? why did they take her away first? Oh, papa, though she is dead, I want to see her; I want to see mamma."

He felt inclined to take her into the room. Maria was looking very much like herself; far more so than she had looked in the last days of life: there was nothing ghastly, nothing repulsive, as is too often the case with the dead; the sweet face of life looked scarcely less sweet now.

"Mamma *that was* is there still, Meta," he said, indicating the next room. "The spirit is gone to heaven; you know that: the body, that which you used to call mamma, will be here yet a little while, and then it will be laid by Uncle Thomas, to wait for the resurrection of the Last Day. Meta, if I should live to

come home from India; that is, if I am in my native land when my time comes to die, they will lay me beside her——”

He stopped abruptly. Meta had lifted her head and was looking at him with a wild questioning expression; as if she could not at first understand or believe his words. “Mamma in there!”

“Yes. But she is dead now, Meta; she is not living.”

“Oh, take me to her! Papa, take me to her!”

“Listen, Meta. Mamma is changed; she looks cold and white, and her eyes are shut, and she does not stir. I would take you in: but I fear—I don’t know whether you would like to look at her!”

But there might be no denial, now that the hope had been given; the child would have broken her heart over it. George Godolphin rose; he pressed the little head upon his shoulder, and carried her to the door, the shawl well wound round her body, her warm feet hanging down. Once in the room, he laid his hand upon the golden curls, to insure that the face was not raised until he saw fit that it should be, and bore her straight to the head of the bed. Then, holding her in his arms very tightly that she might feel sensibly his protection, he suffered her to look full in the white face lying there.

One glance, and Meta turned and buried her head upon him; he could feel her trembling; and he began to question his own wisdom in bringing her in. Another minute, and she looked back and took a longer gaze.

“That’s not mamma,” she said, bursting into tears.

George sat down on a chair close by, and laid her wet cheek against his, and hid his eyes amidst her curls. His emotion had spent itself in the long night, and he thought he could control it now.

“That is mamma, Meta; your mother and my dear wife. It is all that is left of her. Oh, Meta! if we had but known earlier that she was going to die!”

“It does not look like mamma.”

“The moment death comes, the change begins. It has begun in mamma. Do you understand me, Meta? In a few days I shall hear read over her by your grandpapa——” George stopped: it suddenly occurred to him that the Reverend Mr. Hastings would not officiate this time; and he amended his sentence. “I shall hear read over her the words she has I know often read to you; how the corruptible body must die, and be buried in the earth as a grain of wheat is, ere it can be changed and put on immortality.”

“Will she never come again?” sobbed Meta.

“Never here, never again. We shall go to her.”

Meta sobbed on. “I want mamma! I want mamma that talked to me and nursed me. Mamma loved us.”

“Yes, she loved us,” he said, his heart wrung with the recollection of the past: “we shall never find any one else to love us as she loved. Meta, child, listen! Mamma lives still; she is looking down from heaven now and sees and hears us; she loves us, and will love us for ever. And when our turn shall come to die, I hope—I hope—we shall have learnt all that she has learnt, so that God may take us to her.”

“It was of no use prolonging the scene: George still questioned his judgment in allowing Meta to enter upon it. But as he rose to carry her away, the child turned her head with a sharp eager motion to take a last look. A last look of the still form, the dead face of her who but yesterday only had been as they were.

Margery had that instant come in and was standing in her bonnet in the sitting-room. To describe her face

of surprised consternation when she saw Meta carried out of the chamber would take time and trouble. "You can dress her, Margery," George said, giving the child into her arms.

But for his subdued tones, the evident emotion which lay upon him all too palpably in spite of his efforts to suppress it, Margery might have given her private opinion of the existing state of things. As it was, she confined her anger to dumb show. Jerking Meta to her, with a half fond, half fierce gesture, she lifted her hand in dismay at sight of the naked feet, and turned her own gown up to fling over them.

Scarcely was George left alone when he was again to be disturbed. Some visitor had softly entered the house, and was being shown in by Jean. A faint flush came over his haggard face—haggard then with its want of sleep and its weight of sorrow—as he saw Mrs. Hastings. Emotion was shaking her also, and she burst into tears as George placed her in a chair.

"I could not get here in time; I could not get here. Oh, Mr. George, what could have taken her away so suddenly? I had no suspicion she was so very ill."

"It has come more suddenly upon me than upon any one," he answered. "I had no suspicion of it."

"But what has she died of? What complaint had she? I knew of nothing but weakness."

George Godolphin gave no satisfactory answer. He leaned his arm on the elbow of his old-fashioned chair, and his cheek upon his hand. "I would have given my own life to have saved hers," was all he said.

They sat on in silence, Mrs. Hastings bringing her sobs under control. "How is Mr. Hastings?" he presently asked. "He was ill when he left here last night."

“He is in bed this morning. He is really ill, worse than I have known him for years, and he feels the loss of Maria. Grace feels it also dreadfully, they tell me. It takes a great deal to arouse the feelings of Grace, but when once aroused they are apt to be violent. You see—you see—it has come upon us all so unexpectedly.”

George turned to the neglected breakfast-table. “Will you take some?” he asked. “I fear it is cold.” He might well say it: his own cup of tea, poured out but never yet tasted, was going on for ice. Mrs. Hastings shook her head, and they sat on again, neither feeling at ease in the interview. It was the first time George had been brought face to face with Mrs. Hastings since the summer and its heart-burnings.

It was well, perhaps, that Meta came in to break the awkwardness. Dressed now, in her black frock and white pinafore, her pretty curls combed smoothly out, her eyes swollen with weeping, her breath catching itself up. Mrs. Hastings drew her to her knee and kissed her.

“Mamma’s dead,” said Meta, breaking into hysterical sobs.

“Yes, child; yes.”

“Margery won’t let me say any longer, ‘Pray God bless mamma and make her well again.’ Why can’t I say it?”

The streaming eyes were raised to Mrs. Hastings, the little voice was choking with its emotion. Mrs. Hastings seemed choking also.

“Mamma is well now, Meta. She is gone to be better off. She—she——”

“Margery says she’s gone to heaven to be with

Uncle Thomas," resumed Meta, breaking the distressed pause.

"So she is."

"Do you think she has thanked Uncle Thomas for the Bible yet?—and told him that I will always read it? I *will* always read it because mamma bade me."

George drew her towards him; the scene was getting painful for Mrs. Hastings. "Meta must have some breakfast," he whispered, placing her at the table.

But Meta evidently wanted no breakfast that day. Later, when Mrs. Hastings came out of the next room, where she went, she offered to take her home with her to the Rectory. "I think it will be better that she should not remain in the house," she said in an undertone to George. "She will forget her grief, playing with Fanny and Katie Chisholm."

"You are very kind," replied George, and a sharp remembrance darted through him of the cause which had located the little Chisholms at the Rectory, "but I expect her to be sent for almost momentarily to Ashlydyat. She is to be there from to-day. I could not well take her out to India with me."

"I heard it was so arranged; and she will have advantages at Ashlydyat which I could not offer: but had you been at a fault for a home, I would have taken her, in spite of——" In spite of the past, Mrs. Hastings was about thoughtlessly to say, but she stopped in time, and a flush rose to her cheek. "Yes, we would have taken her and done the best we could: she is Maria's child."

He could only repeat a word of acknowledgment, and Mrs. Hastings went out. Margery hastened after her to the gate.

"Did she die quietly, Margery?" Mrs. Hastings asked.

the gate in her hand. "Your master is sadly cut up, I can see that, with all his apparent calmness, and I did not like to ask him particulars."

"She died like a lamb, without so much as a sigh," answered Margery. "Master told me so; there was nobody with her but him. As to his being cut up," she added, in a different and slighting tone, "it's only nateral he should be."

"What could have killed her? Only this time yesterday I was thinking of her, as busy in her preparations for India."

"She have been going right straight on for death ever since that blow in the summer," was Margery's answer. "Looking back, ma'am, and reflecting on it, I seem to see it all, and I wonder I never saw it then. There were troubles of more sorts than one that came upon her together, and I suppose she couldn't battle with them."

Mrs. Hastings sighed deeply as she walked away, thinking how full of care the world was, how unequally lots in it seemed to be dealt out. At the turning of the road she met the close carriage of Lady Averil, with all its badges of rank: its coronet, its servants, its fine horses and their showy harness. Cecil leaned forward and bowed, and Mrs. Hastings rightly conjectured that she was going herself to bring away Meta. "Yes, lots are differently dealt out in life," she murmured: "it is well that Meta should be brought up at Ashlydyat."

It was a somewhat busy week for George Godolphin, in spite of his sorrow. Many arrangements had to be made: for giving up the apartments; for disposing of personal effects. George's would go with him; Meta's to Ashlydyat; Maria's—what of Maria's? George begged Mrs. Hastings to see to them. Perhaps no

bitterer grief had wrung his heart than in the moment when he examined the little cheap trunk, so despised by Charlotte Pain when consigned to that lady's care for safety the previous summer. "How good, how pure were her secrets! how great the proof of love and loyalty to him! The bit of hair of their lost children, the two or three love-letters he had written to her; the memorandum made on the day of their engagement: "I was this day engaged to George Godolphin. I pray God to render me worthy of him! to be to him a loving and dutiful wife."

She had been all that; more than all! Had she been less loving, it might perhaps have been better for her. George Godolphin had probably not been the sort of faithful husband that may be set up under a glass-case as a model pattern to delinquent men in general, but he was not dead yet to the sense of right and wrong, or to the impulses of natural affection. He did not much care for the pretty little curls, or for his own love-letters to Maria; but he put that memorandum paper into his pocket-book, together with a lock of hair that had been cut off after death.

Margery's decision would have to be made promptly: whether she should accept Miss Janet's offer of retiring to Scotland and quiet, or go to Ashlydyat to have her life teased out by Miss Meta. Lord Averil threw an inducement into the scale: "When children come to Ashlydyat, Margery, you shall have the ruling of them, as you had of the children at Ashlydyat in the years gone by." Margery answered that she must "turn things about in her mind." And so the days wore on.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SAD PARTING.

AGAIN another funeral in All Souls' church, another opening of the vault of the Godolphins! But it was not All Souls' rector to officiate this time; he stood at the grave with George. Isaac Hastings had come down from London, Harry had come from his tutorship in the school; Lord Averil was again there, and Mr. Crosse had asked to attend.

Prior's Ash had looked out on the funeral, as it had on that of Thomas Godolphin; at the black hearse with its sable plumes. Some inquisitive ones had solaced their curiosity by taking a private view previously of the coffin at the undertaker's, had counted its nails and studied its plate. Prior's Ash did not make this day into a sort of solemn holiday as it had the other one; no private houses had their blinds drawn, no shops were closed: but people did look out sorrowfully and pityingly as the simple funeral went slowly past. They followed it with their regretful eyes, they said one to another, what a sad thing it was for her, only twenty-eight, to die. They forgot that the sadness was left for this world; that she had escaped from it and was free, as a chrysalis casts its shell.

Ay, she had left it behind her, all the sorrow and sadness! she had entered into her rest.

George Godolphin stood over the grave and contrived to maintain an outward calmness—even as his brother Thomas had contrived to maintain it when he had stood in the same churchyard over the burial of Ethel. The two events were not quite analogous perhaps, and Thomas, at any rate, had nothing of remorse on his conscience. He, George, stood motionless, betraying no sign of emotion save that of intense, preternatural stillness: but the eyes of Prior's Ash in the shape of its many idlers were on him, bracing his nerves, steeling his heart. There suddenly arose one burst of sobs to delight the gaping spectators, but they did not come from him. They came from Harry Hastings.

It drew to an end at last. The men began to shovel the earth on to the coffin as they had shovelled it so short a while before on Thomas Godolphin's, and George turned away. Not yet to the mourning-coach that waited for him, but through the little gate leading to the rectory. He was about to leave Prior's Ash for good that night, and common courtesy demanded that he should say a word of farewell to Mrs. Hastings.

In the darkened drawing-room with Grace and Rose, in their new black attire, sat Mrs. Hastings: George Godolphin half started back as they rose to greet him. He did not stay to sit: he stood by the fire-place, his hat in his hand, its flowing crape nearly touching the ground.

“I will say good-bye to you now, Mrs. Hastings.”

‘You really leave to-night?’

‘By the seven o'clock train. Will you permit me to express my hope that a brighter time may yet dawn for you; to assure you that no effort on my part shall be spared to conduce to it?’

He spoke in a low, quiet, meaning tone, and he held

her hand between his. Mrs. Hastings could not misunderstand him—that he was hinting at a hope of reimbursing somewhat of their pecuniary loss.

“Thank you for your good wishes,” she said, keeping down the tears. “You will allow me—you will speak to Lady Averil to allow me to have the child here for a day sometimes?”

“Need you ask it?” he answered, a generous warmth in his tone. “Cecil, I am quite sure, recognises your right in the child at least in an equal degree with her own, and is glad to recognise it. Fare you well; fare you well, dear Mrs. Hastings.”

He went out, shaking hands with Grace and Rose as he passed, thinking how much he had always liked Mrs. Hastings, with her courteous manners and gentle voice, so like those of his lost wife. The rector met him in the passage, and George held out his hand.

“I shall not see you again, sir. I leave to-night.”

The rector took the hand. “I wish you a safe voyage!” he said. “I hope things will be more prosperous with you in India than they have been latterly here!”

“We have all need to wish that,” was George’s answer. “Mr. Hastings, promises from me might be regarded as valueless, but this much I wish to say ere we part: that I carry the weight of my debt to you about me, and I will lessen it should it be in my power. You will”—dropping his voice—“you will see that the inscription is properly placed on the tombstone?”

“I will. Have you given orders for it?”

“Oh yes. Farewell, sir. Farewell, Harry,” he added, as the two sons came in. “Isaac, I shall see you in London.”

He passed swiftly out to the mourning-coach, and was

driven home. Above everything on earth George hated this leave-taking: but there were two or three to whom it had to be spoken.

Not until the dusk did he go up to Ashlydyat. He called in at Lady Godolphin's Folly as he passed it: she was his father's widow, and Bessy was there. My lady was very cool. My lady told him that it was his place to give the refusal of Meta to her: and she should never forgive the slight. From the very moment she heard that Maria's life was in danger, she had made up her mind to break through her rules of keeping children at a distance, and to take the child. She should have reared her in every luxury as Miss Godolphin of Ashlydyat, and left her a handsome fortune: as it was, she washed her hands of her. George thanked her for her good intention as a matter of course; but his heart leaped within him at the thought that Meta was safe and secure with Cecil: he would have taken her and Margery out to make acquaintance with the elephants, rather than have left Meta to Lady Godolphin.

"She'll get over the smart, George," whispered Bessy, as she came out to bid him God-speed. "I shall be having the child here sometimes, you know. My lady's all talk: she never cherishes resentment long."

He entered the old home, Ashlydyat, and was left alone with Meta at his own request. She was in the deepest black: crape tucks on her short frock; not a bit of white to be seen about her, save her socks and the tips of her drawers; and Cecil had bought her a jet necklace of round beads, with a little black cross hanging from it on her neck. George sat down and took her on his knee. What with the drawn blinds and the growing twilight, the room was nearly dark, and he had to look closely at the little face turned to him. She

was very quiet, rather pale, as if she had grieved a good deal in the last few days.

“Meta,” he began, and then he stopped to clear his husky voice—“Meta, I am going away.”

She made no answer. She buried her face upon him and began to cry softly. It was no news to her, for Cecil had talked to her the previous night. But she clasped her arms tightly round him as if she could not let him go, and began to tremble.

“Meta!—my child!”

“I want mamma!” burst from the little full heart. “I want mamma to be with me again. Is she gone away for ever? Is she put down in the grave with Uncle Thomas? Oh, papa! I want to see her!”

A moment’s struggle with himself, and then George Godolphin gave way to the emotion which he had so successfully restrained in the churchyard. They sobbed together, the father and child: her face against his, the sobs bursting freely from his bosom. He let them come; loud, passionate, bitter sobs; unchecked, unsubdued. Do not despise him for it! they are not the worst men who can thus give way to the vehemence of our common nature.

It spent itself after a time; such emotion must spend itself; but it could not wholly pass yet. Meta was the first to speak: the same vain wish breaking from her, the same cry.

“I want mamma! Why did she go away for ever?”

“Not for ever, Meta. Only for a time. Oh, child, we shall go to her: we shall go to her in a little while. Mamma’s gone to be an angel; to keep a place for us in heaven.”

“How long will it be?”

“Not a moment of our lives but it will draw nearer

and nearer. Meta, it may be well for us that those we love should go on first, or we might never care to go thither of ourselves."

She lay more quietly. George laid his hand upon her head, unconsciously playing with her golden hair, his tears dropping on it.

"You must think of mamma always, Meta. Think that she is looking down at you, on all you do, and try and please her. She was very good: and you must be good, making ready to go to her."

A renewed burst of sobs came from the child. George waited, and then resumed.

"When I come back—if I live to come back; or when you come to me in India; at any rate when I see you again, Meta, you will probably be grown up; no longer a child, but a young lady. If I shall only find you like mamma was in all things, I shall be happy. Do you understand, darling?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

"Good, and gentle, and kind, and lady-like,—and remembering always that there's another world, and that mamma has gone on to it. I should like to have kept you with me, Meta, but it cannot be: I must go out alone. You will not quite forget me, will you?"

She put up her hand and her face to his, and moaned in her pain. George laid his aching brow on hers. He knew that it might be the last time they should meet on earth.

"I shall write to you by every mail, Meta, and you must write to me. You can put great capital letters together now, and that will do to begin with. And," his voice faltered, "when you walk by mamma's grave on Sundays—and see her name there—you will remember her—and me. You will think how we are sepa-

rated: mamma, in heaven; I, in a far-off land; you, here: but you know the separation will not be for ever, and each week will bring us nearer to its close—its close in some way. If—if we never meet again on earth, Meta——”

“Oh don't, papa! I want you to come back to me.”

He choked down his emotion. He took the little face in his hands and kissed it fervently: in that moment, in his wrung feelings, he almost wished he had had no beloved child to abandon.

“You must be called by your own name now. I should wish it. Meta was all very well,” he continued, half to himself, “when *she* was here; that the names should not clash. Be a good child, my darling. Be very obedient to Aunt Cecil, as you used to be to mamma.”

“Aunt Cecil is not mamma,” said Meta, her little heart swelling.

“No, my darling, but she will be to you as mamma, and she and Lord Averil will love you very much. I wish—I wish I could have kept you with me, Meta!”

She wished it also. If ever a child knew what an aching heart was, she knew it then.

“And now I must go,” he added—for indeed he did not care to prolong the pain. “I shall write to you from London, Meta, and I shall write you quite a packet when I am on board ship. You must get on well with your writing, so as to be able soon to read my letters yourself. Farewell, farewell, my darling child!”

How long she clung to him; how long he kept her clinging, he paid no heed. When the emotion on both sides was spent, he took her by the hand and led her to the next room. Lady Averil came forward.

“Cecil,” he said, his voice quiet and subdued, “she

must be called Maria now—in remembrance of her mother.”

“Yes,” said Cecil, eagerly. “We should all like it. Sit down, George. Lord Averil has stepped out somewhere, but he will not be long.”

“I cannot stay. I shall see him outside, I dare say. If not, he will come to the station. Will you say to him——”

A low burst of tears from the child interrupted the sentence. George, in speaking to Cecil, had loosed her hand, and she laid her head down on a sofa to cry. He took her up in his arms, and she clung to him tightly: it was only the old scene over again, and George felt that they were not alone now. He imprinted a last kiss upon her face, and gave her to his sister.

“She had better be taken away, Cecil.”

Lady Averil, with many loving words, carried her outside the door, sobbing as she was, and called to her maid. “Be very kind to her,” she whispered. “It is a sad parting. And—Harriet—henceforth she is to be called by her proper name—Maria.”

“She will get over it in a day or two, George,” said Lady Averil, returning.

“Yes, I know that,” he answered, his face turned from Cecil. “Cherish the remembrance of her mother within her as much as you possibly can, Cecil: I should wish her to grow up like Maria.”

“If you would but stay a last hour with us!”

“I can’t; I can’t: it is best that I should go. I do not know what the future may bring forth,” he lingered to say. “Whether I shall come home—or live to come home; or she, when she is older, come out to me: it is all uncertain.”

“Were I you, George, I would not indulge the

thought of the latter. She will be better here—as it seems to me.”

“Yes—there’s no doubt of it. But the separation is a cruel one. However—the future must be left. God bless you, Cecil! and thank you, thank you ever for your kindness.”

The tears rolled down her cheeks as he bent to kiss her. “George,” she whispered, timidly—“if I might but ask you one question.”

“Ask me anything.”

“Is—have you any intention—shall you be likely to think of—of replacing Maria by Charlotte Pain—of making her your wife?”

“Replacing *Maria* by *her!*” he echoed, his face flushing. “Heaven forgive you for thinking it!”

The question cured George’s present emotion more effectually than anything else could have done. But his haughty anger against Cecil was unreasonable, and he felt that it was.

“Forgive me, my dear: but it sounded so like an insult to my dear wife. Be easy: *she* will never replace Maria.”

In the porch, as George went out, he met Lord Averil hastening in. Lord Averil would have put his arm within George’s to walk with him through the grounds, but George drew back.

“No, not to-night: let me go alone. I am not fit for companionship. Good-night. Good-bye,” he added, his voice hoarse. “I thought to say a word of gratitude to you, for the past, for the present, but I cannot. If I live——”

“Don’t say ‘if,’ George: go away with a good heart, and take my best wishes with you. A new land and a new life! you may live the past down yet.”

Their hands lingered together in a firm pressure, and George turned away from Ashlydyat for the last time. Ashlydyat that might have been his.

There was Margery yet : and he had one or two final things to say to her, arrangements to make. The apartments were to be given up on the morrow, and Margery would then take up her abode at Ashlydyat, for it was there she had elected to remain. She *could not* give up her darling : her bereaved darling : who in Margery's opinion would be trebly an orphan if she also deserted her : and it appeared likely that there would not in future be so indulged a damsel in all the county as Miss Maria Godolphin.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SAFE VOYAGE TO HIM!

WAS it ever your fate or fortune to be aboard an Indian vessel when it was just on the start? If so, there's no doubt you retain a more vivid than agreeable reminiscence of the reigning confusion. Passengers coming on at the last moment and going frantic over their luggage or the discovered inconveniences of their cabins; cords and ropes creaking and coiling; sailors shouting, officers commanding; boxes shooting up from the boats on to the deck, and to your feet, only in turn to be shot down again to the hold!—it is Bedlam gone frantic and nothing less.

On a fine ship, anchored off Gravesend, this scene was taking place on a crisp day in early January. A bright, inspiriting, sunny day, giving earnest—if there's anything in the popular belief—of a bright voyage. One gentleman stood aloof from the general *mêlée*. He had been on board half an hour or more; had seen to his cabin, his berth, his baggage—so much of the latter as he could see to; and now stood alone watching the turmoil. Others, passengers, had come on board in groups, surrounded by hosts of friends; he came alone: a tall and very distinguished-looking man, attired in

the deepest mourning, with a grey plaid crossed on his shoulder.

As if jealous that the ship should have all the confusion to itself, the shore was getting up a little on its own account. Amidst the drays, the trucks, the carts; amidst the cases and packages which were heaped on the bank, not all, it was to be hoped, for that ship, or she'd never got off to-day; amidst the numerous crowds of living beings, idlers and workers, that such a scene brings together, there came something dashing into the very throng of them, scattering everything that could be scattered right and left.

An exceedingly remarkable carriage, of the style that may be called "dashing," especially if height be any criterion, its wheels red and green, its horses of high mettle, and a couple of fierce dogs barking and leaping round it. The scattered people looked up in astonishment to see a lady guiding those horses, and deemed at first that the gleaming sun, shining right into their eyes, had deceived them: pawing, snorting, prancing, fiery animals; which, far from being spent by their ten or twelve mile journey, looked as if they were eager to start upon another. The lady managed them admirably: a very handsome lady was she, of the same style as the carriage, dashing, with jet-black eyes large and free, and a scarlet feather in her hat that might have been found thirty-six inches long, had it been measured from top to tip. A quiet little gentleman, slight and fair, sat beside her, and a groom lounged grandly with folded arms in the back seat. She, on her high cushions, was a good yard above either of them; the little gentleman in fact was completely eclipsed: and she held the reins in her white gauntleted hands and played gallantly with the whip, perfectly at ease, conscious that she was

those foaming steeds' master. Suddenly, without the least warning, she drew them back on their haunches.

"There she is! in the middle of the stream. Can't you read it, Dolf? *The Indus*. How stupid of the people to tell us she was lying lower down!"

Jumping from the carriage without waiting to be assisted, she left the groom in charge and made her way to the pier, condescendingly taking the gentleman's arm as she hastened up it, and hissing off the dogs as a hint that they were to remain behind. I am sure you cannot need an introduction to either of these people; but you shall have it for all that: Mr. and Mrs. Rodolf Pain.

She, Charlotte, did all the acting, and the talking too. Her husband had always been of retiring manners, as you may remember; and he had now grown far more retiring than he used to be. Charlotte made the bargain for a boat: they got into it, and were pulled to the ship's side.

For a few moments they had to take their chance: they made only two more in the universal confusion: but Charlotte caught hold of a handsome young man with a gold band upon his cap, who was shouting out orders.

"Can you tell me whether Mr. George Godolphin has come on board yet?"

"Mr. George Godolphin," repeated the young officer, cutting short some directions midway, and looking half bewildered in the general disorder.

"A first-class passenger, bound for Calcutta," explained Charlotte.

"I can inquire. Tymms," beckoning to him one of the middies, "go and ask the steward whether a gentleman of the name of Godolphin has come down."

But there was no need of further search. Charlotte's restless eyes had caught sight of George—the solitary passenger in mourning whom you saw standing alone. She and Mr. Pain made the best of their way to him, over the impediments blocking up the deck.

He did not see their approach. He was leaning over the side of the ship on the opposite side to that facing the shore, and Charlotte gave him a smart rap on the arm with her gauntlet-glove.

“Now, Mr. George Godolphin! what do you say for your manners?”

He turned quickly, his face flushing slightly with surprise when he saw them standing there: and he shook hands with them both.

“I ask what you have to say for your manners, Mr. George? The very idea of your leaving England for good, and never calling to say good-bye to us!”

“I met Mr. Pain a day or two ago,” said George. “He——”

“Met Mr. Pain! what on earth if you did?” interrupted Charlotte. “Mr. Pain's not me. You might have found time to dine with us. I have a great mind to quarrel with you, George Godolphin, by way of a leave-taking.”

Something like a smile crossed George's lips. “The fact is, I thought I might have seen you at the Verralls', Mrs. Pain. I went there for half an hour yesterday. I charged Mrs. Verrall——”

“Rubbish!” retorted Charlotte. “When you must have known we had moved into a house at Shooter's Hill you could not suppose we were still at the Verralls'. Our catching you this morning here was a mere chance. We stayed late in town yesterday afternoon at the furniture warehouse, and, in driving back down the

Strand, saw Isaac Hastings, so I pulled up to ask what had become of you and whether you were dead or alive. He informed us you were to sail to-day from Gravesend, and I told Dolf I should drive down. But it is ill-mannered of you, Mr. George."

"You will readily understand, that since my last return from Prior's Ash, I have not felt inclined for visiting," he said, in a low, grave tone, unconsciously glancing at his black attire. "I intended you no discourtesy, Mrs. Pain: but for one thing, I did not know where you might be met with."

"And couldn't find out!" retorted Charlotte. "Dolf could have given you the address I suppose the other day, had you asked. He's too great a fool to think to give it of his own accord."

George looked at "Dolf," whom his wife seemed so completely to ignore; looked at him with a pleasant smile, as if he would atone for Charlotte's rudeness. "We were not together a minute, were we, Mr. Pain? I was in a hurry, and you seemed in one."

"Don't say any more about it, Mr. Godolphin," spoke Dolf, as resentfully as he dared. "That's just like her! Making a fuss over nothing! Of course you could not be expected to visit at such a time: and anybody but Charlotte would have the good feeling to see it. I am pleased to be able to see you here and wish you a pleasant voyage; but I remonstrated with her this morning, that it was scarcely the right thing to intrude upon you. But she never listens, you know."

"You needn't have come," snapped Charlotte.

"And then you would have gone on at me about my ill manners, as you have to Mr. Godolphin! One never knows how to please you, Charlotte."

George resumed: to break the silence possibly, more

than with any other motive. "Have you settled at Shooter's Hill?"

"Settled!" shrieked Charlotte, "settled at Shooter's Hill! Where it's ten miles, good, from any theatre or other place of amusement! No, thank you. A friend of Verrall's had this place to let for a few weeks, and Dolf was idiot enough to take it——"

"You consented first, Charlotte," interrupted poor Dolf.

"Which I never should have done had I reflected on the bother of getting up to town," said Charlotte, equably. "Settled at Shooter's Hill! I'd as soon do as you are going to do, Mr. George—bury myself alive in Calcutta. We have taken on lease a charming house in Belgravia, and shall enter on a succession of dinner-parties: one a week we think of giving during the season. We shall not get into it much before February: it takes some time to choose furniture."

"I hate dinner-parties," said Dolf, ruefully.

"You are not obliged to appear at them," said Charlotte, with much graciousness. "I can get your place filled at table, I dare say. What is that noise and scuffling?"

"They are heaving the anchor," replied George. "We shall soon be on the move."

"I hear great alterations are being made at Ashlydyat," remarked Charlotte.

"Only on the spot called the Dark Plain. The archway is taken down and a summer-house being built on the site. An extensive sort of summer-house, for it is to contain three or four rooms, I believe: it will have a fine view."

"And what of those ugly gorse-bushes?"

“They will be cleared away, and the place laid out as a pleasure-garden.”

“Is my lady starrng it at the Folly?”

“Scarcely: just now,” quietly answered George.

“Miss Godolphin has gone to Scotland, I hear.”

“Yes. Bessy will reside with Lady Godolphin.”

“And tart Margery? What has become of her?”

“She remains with Maria at Ashlydyat.”

Charlotte opened her eyes—Charlotte had a habit of opening them when puzzled or surprised. “Maria! Who is Maria?”

“The child. We call her by her proper name now.”

“Oh, by-the-way, I nearly forgot it,” returned Charlotte, in the old good-natured tone: for, it may be remarked, that during the interview her tone had been what she had just called Margery—tart. “I should like to have the child up on a visit when we get into our house, and astonish her mind with the wonders of London. I suppose Lady Averil will make no objection?”

A very perceptible flush, red and haughty, dyed the face of George Godolphin. “You are very kind to think of it, Mrs. Pain; but I fear Lady Averil would not consent. Indeed, I have desired that the child may not visit, except amidst her immediate relatives.”

“As you please,” said Charlotte, resentfully. “Dolf, I think we may as well be moving. I only meant it as a kindness to the child.”

“And I thank you for it,” said George, in a warm tone. “For all the kindness you have shown her, Mrs. Pain, I thank you sincerely and heartily. Take care!”

He interposed to prevent a great rope, that was being borne along, from touching her. Charlotte began in

earnest to think it was time to move, unless she would be carried down the river in the ship.

"When shall you come back?" she asked him.

He shook his head. He could not tell any more than she could. The future was all indistinct.

"Well, you won't forget to find us out, whenever you do come?" returned Charlotte.

"Certainly not. Thank you."

"Do you know," cried Charlotte, impulsively, "you are strangely different in manners, George Godolphin! They have grown as cold and formal as a block of ice. Haven't they, Dolf?"

"If they have, it's your fault," was the satisfactory answer of Dolf. "You keep firing off such a heap of personal questions, Charlotte. I see no difference in Mr. Godolphin: but he has had a good deal of trouble, you know."

"Shall we ever hear of you?" continued Charlotte, pushing back Dolf with her elbow, and completely eclipsing his meek face with her swinging scarlet feather.

"No doubt you will, Mrs. Pain, through one or another. Not that I shall be a voluminous correspondent with England, I expect: except, perhaps, with Ashlydyat."

"Well, fare you well, George," she said, holding out both her gauntleted hands. "You seem rather cranky this morning, but I forgive you: it *is* trying to the spirits to leave one's native place for good and all. I wish you all good luck with my best heart!"

"Thank you," he said, taking the hands within his own and shaking them; "thank you always. Good-bye. Good-bye, Mr. Pain."

Mr. Pain shook hands in a less demonstrative manner

than his wife, and his leave-taking, if quiet, was not less sincere. George piloted them to the gangway, and saw them pulled ashore in the little boat.

They ascended to the carriage, which by all appearance had been keeping up a perpetual dance of commotion since they left it, the fault probably of its horses and its dogs: and Charlotte, taking her high seat, dashed away in style; her whip flourishing, the dogs barking, her red feather tossing and gleaming. What she'll do when these feathers go out of fashion it's hard to say: Charlotte could hardly stir out without one.

And by-and-by, the anchor up, the tug attached, the good ship *Indus* was fairly on her way, being towed smoothly down the Channel under the command of her pilot. The passengers were tormenting themselves still: the sailors seemed to be perpetually hurrying hither and thither, the steward was in a tumult: but George Godolphin, wrapped in his grey plaid, remained in his place, quiet and still, gazing out over the bows of the vessel. What were his reflections, as his native land began to recede from his eyes? Did he regret it? Did he regret the position he had lost; the ruin he had wrought; the death of his wife? Did he finally regret the inevitable PAST, with all its mistakes and sins?—and think that if it could but come over again, he would act differently? Possibly so. Once he lifted his hat, and pushed the golden hair further from his brow, from his handsome face, not less bright or handsome than of yore—save in its expression. In that, there was an unmistakable look of weary sadness, never before seen on the features of gay George Godolphin.

And when, hours after, the rest of the cabin passengers were summoned to dinner, he never stirred, but

kept his place there, looking far into the dusky night, glancing up at the stars that came glittering out in the blue canopy of heaven.

A safe landing to him on the shores of Calcutta! A safe and sure landing on a different shore that must come after it!

And Mr. and Mrs. Pain's dinner-parties in Belgravia are a great success.

THE END.







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